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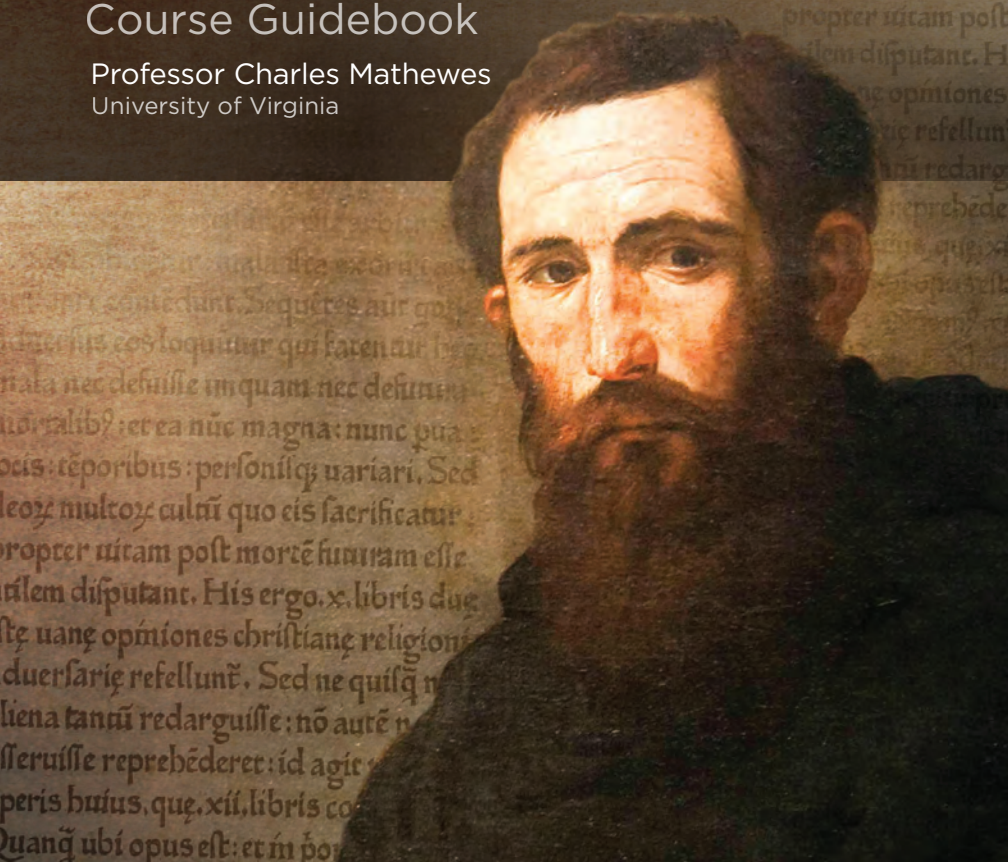
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# Books That Matter

# *The City of God*

Course Guidebook

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# Books That Matter:

## *The City of God*

### Scope

Augustine's *The City of God* is one of the most important books in Western civilization. Composed 1,600 years ago, its size and scope are so intimidating that few attempt to make their way through it. This course aims to change that: It serves as an introduction to the text and a guide that will help you navigate *The City of God's* main streets and its hidden neighborhoods.

While the course proceeds thematically, the general structure of the lectures follows the overall path of *The City of God's* many chapters, discussing themes as they appear sequentially in the pages of the work. It begins by exploring the enormously complicated figure of Augustine of Hippo. Then the course analyzes the 410 A.D. Sack of Rome and how it crystallized, both for Augustine and his pagan opponents, a set of questions and concerns that inform every page of *The City of God*.

Augustine leveraged the opportunity to respond to those concerns in order to produce something entirely unprecedented: not just a response to those concerns, but a new vision of history and the duties of humans in this world under God's providential governance. It is this vision that the course spends most of its time exploring. The course explores many of the most fundamental concepts and categories of Christendom, which stretched from Augustine's age until the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century and still supplies many of the moral, religious, and political categories people use to understand the world today.

*The City of God* is the longest single work presenting a sustained argument unified around a single theme to survive from Greco-Roman antiquity. As such, it offers an unparalleled window into the

world of classical antiquity: Virgil, Cicero, Seneca, Plato, Aristotle, and many others appear in its pages. This course will explore the history of the ancient world, and how Augustine thought about and taught others to think about that world's grandeur and tragedy.

Finally, the work remains a treasure trove of political, philosophical, and religious insight for our own day, informing the thinking of academics, religious leaders, and statespeople even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This course tackles the book in its full depth and breadth, helping you grasp both the architectonics and the detail of *The City of God*. The course's goals: to deepen your understanding of the thought of Augustine; to enrich your understanding of the classical world in which he lived; and to grapple with the fundamental questions that drive the book forward.

# Your Passport to *The City of God*

## Lecture 1

The metaphor of travel can helpfully illuminate what must happen with a book like *The City of God*—or *De Civitate Dei*, as it's called in Latin. *The City of God* is the way by which we go to the land of Augustinian Christianity, definitely a foreign country, no matter what your previous education or philosophical or theological training has been. And yet it has had a fundamental, if very ancient, impact on each of us here—who we are, how we think of ourselves, how we think of time and history and the meaning of life.

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### Structure and Origin

- The scale and structural complexity of *The City of God* make it unique. At more than 1,000 pages in Latin, it is the longest single work to have survived from the ancient world that has a coherent theme and an intact argumentative architecture. Twenty-two “books,” or longish chapters, each comprising twenty to thirty subsections, are divided into two parts, corresponding to two large tasks.
  - › Books 1 through 10 defend Christians using the technique of immanent critique—that is, a critique that uses interlocutors’ own sources and possibly their own words to reveal contradictions and other flaws in their account.
  - › Books 11 through 22 offer a constructive account of the Christian view of how to inhabit the world and to be a good Roman. This shift perhaps signals a fundamental change of mood in Christian thought, from polemic with enemies, foreign or domestic, to pedagogy for believers.

- Provoked initially by the sack of Rome by the Visigoths and pagan charges that the sack and indeed the crumbling of the Roman Empire in the west was the fault of the Christians, Augustine decided to explain why that wasn't true, adding a positive explanation of how Christians should understand life in this world before the end of time.

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## Insight and Argument

- *The City of God* is not only an impressive relic; it is also a living wellspring of wisdom, insight and argument and a powerful lens through which to view the world today. In it you see a full considered judgment of ancient Rome and a full exposition of what would become the foundation for a comprehensive Christian worldview.
- Augustine's point was that there is saint and sinner in every person; while he organized his argument formally to distinguish between Christians and pagans, his audience is made up of humans, some Christian and some not. They share a number of assumptions even if they do not completely agree, and each needs to be challenged and taught if they are to live a truly flourishing life. The pagans' charges are the occasion for his writing, but not the target of it.
- *The City of God* is a summation of Augustine's thought, addressed to Roman Christians troubled by the pagans' charges, confident those accusations are wrong but confused about their condition and their station and duties in the post-Constantine world. Understanding this point is very important to understanding the tone of the later books, the way Augustine presents arguments, and indeed a whole way of thinking about and within Christianity.



Saint Augustine of Hippo

## Challenging Assumptions

- A common feature of Augustine's books is that their titles lead us to expect one thing, but their arguments show us that to understand that thing, we must understand something else entirely.
  - › So the *Confessions*, known as his autobiography, is actually about how rightly to know God; *On the Trinity* turns out to be about how we can understand the nature of God as triune only if we know what it means to be human. Similarly, *The City of God* turns out to be less about the Heavenly City at rest than about humanity's peregrinations in this fallen world.
  - › The lesson here about Augustine's thought is that to answer the question we are asking, we are always advised to step back and examine the assumptions that led us to ask the question in the first place. Only by naming and challenging these assumptions can we really get at the deepest level of our convictions, and only there can the arduous work of change begin.
- For Augustine, this is a conversionist project, not a replacement project; that is, pagans' visions of how the world hangs together are still rattling around in our heads. Thus, in engaging and exorcising them, we are helping to convert ourselves from the thought-world of the fallen worldly city to the true new meanings of the City of God. This book is not meant to show people that they are wrong, but how they can begin to become right.
- Although *The City of God* is a rhetorical masterwork, there is a deeply pedagogical aim to this book: It is a kind of beginner's manual for Christian life in this world. To imagine how to criticize a culture's basic terms of self-understanding and to suggest to its members a radical revision of those terms is difficult. You must show how the new is within them waiting to be born. You must not change them, but show them how they are already changing.

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## Aims of the Course

- *The City of God* expands our understanding of very many things. It is the way by which we go to a deeper understanding of politics, the human condition, and our historical antecedents.
  - Augustine's aim is for the book to point beyond itself, to our moral and spiritual salvation. That is why he asks questions about whether we are admiring the book or confronting the demands he wants the book to make on us.
  - Our aim, taking the book on its own terms to understand what it is trying to argue and how it makes its case, is harder in our day than it was in Augustine's. To accomplish that task, we will go on a guided tour of the city, book by book, with a focus on the large themes each book brings up. We will see that Augustine addresses these themes in roughly the same order that we will discuss them in these lectures.
- This tour through the book will offer you multiple layers of learning:
  - First, to understand the structure of the book—its overall architecture and details, its organization, its arguments, how they are composed in a strategic structure that means to mount from one moment to the next, and why Augustine chose this particular structure and this particular method for his argument.
  - Second, to understand the thought of Augustine—what he assumes is true; what he thinks to be right but realizes not everyone agrees; how he conceives the nature of God, of the human, and of many other things; what he takes to be the point of argument; and what sort of conviction an argument can attain.
  - Third, to understand the world of late antiquity—what fundamental questions occupied people, under what crucial assumptions did they operate that led them to those

questions, what anxieties or concerns they had, and what hopes they had for themselves and their world.

- Finally, to understand the fundamental and perennial philosophical and theological questions raised by this book—that is to say, questions latent in its argument and present in how it argues, both in Augustine’s day and in our own.
- Our first job will be to try as best we can to hear what Augustine is saying. This task can be much harder than it seems. Historical inquiries are prone to two errors: assuming subjects never died, and imagining they never lived. Both encourage us to forget that they were humans like us. We are tempted to assume that ancient thinkers, were they alive today, would utter the same things that they did millennia ago.
  - Only by seeing historical figures in their time can we understand the distinct ways in which they may be in significant tension with it. We must understand Augustine as just like us—a man who struggled for clarity, changed his mind, and had to think using tools from a fairly limited range of intellectual options whose parameters he did not set.
  - In apprehending his arguments and feeling their grip, we understand we are at least in the same arena with him, we are the same kind of creature that he is—whether we agree with him or not. He has something to say to us, something of urgent importance for our lives. Augustine would agree: He repeatedly reminded his audiences not to confuse his words with those of Scripture, and not to turn his name into an idol.
  - And yet Augustine is, in important ways, not like us. His particular gifts will likely leave you in awe the more you are able to see their scope. Today we believe that all humans are created equal. In many ways that’s true. But it can also obscure a very deep truth: that we are also very different, and have very diverse gifts.



- This otherness can itself be a lesson for us—a lesson in the scope of human achievement. Sometimes we think of this as a matter of superhuman genius, or divine inspiration. Exceptionally gifted people share all our frailties and yet in some way rise above them to achieve something whose relevance and importance for our world is sometimes directly correlated to the obscurity of the connections linking them to our world
- Augustine doesn't want us thinking he's some sort of superhuman genius. He is far more human, and far less merciful than that: He knows he is a human, and the differences between him and us are not differences of species. So everything he says can be understood—a terrifying challenge. We'll begin in the next lecture by gaining some brief acquaintance with the author—Augustine of Hippo.

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### Questions to Consider

1. Augustine's *The City of God* involves both critique and affirmation. How do you think critique and affirmation should be related in large projects such as this?
  2. What would it mean to write a book for 15 years? How would you sustain continuity across so long a time of composition?
-

# Who Was Augustine of Hippo?

If you have heard about Augustine at all, it is likely that you have heard some collection of platitudes: that he was a metaphysical dualist and expressed an escapist animus toward material creation; that he taught a juridical morality of guilt that subjugated humans under the providence of a puppet-master God; and that he is politically a fundamentally antidemocratic thinker, an authoritarian who gave the highest moral imprimatur for the coercion of the Middle Ages that culminated in the Holy Inquisition. All of these are crucial for understanding Augustine and his book. All are crucially wrong.

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## Early Life and Education

- Augustine's world understood itself to be in some deep continuity with Pharaonic Egypt, whereas we feel ourselves severed from the Roman world Augustine inhabited.
  - He was born in 354 in Thagaste, in Roman North Africa—a medium-sized provincial town in the farming heartland of the Roman Empire—a cultural backwater. His father, Patricius, was a Roman transplant. His mother, Monica, may have been from North African stock.
  - Augustine was given a good education and responded well; as a promising youth he was sponsored to go to Carthage to study further and eventually went to Milan to become a teacher of rhetoric.
  - He had a common-law wife whose name he never revealed, and a son, Adeodatus, born in about 371 or 372. Augustine sent his wife away shortly before his conversion in 387.

Adeodatus died at age 17, soon after he and his father were baptized.

- It is one of the mysteries of Augustine—an influence we can never measure—that everything we have that he wrote came from the mind of the father of a dead, much beloved, son and a husband who had sent his wife away.
- From his training as a teacher of rhetoric, Augustine learned a certain idea of moral formation, of what it means to become a fully civilized man. Rhetoric was not simply one discipline among others in Roman education; it was the basis of education, the aim of which was to become a certain kind of agent. To be thus educated meant to be civilized.

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### Involvement with Manicheism

- Throughout his youth, Augustine was involved with Manicheism, which shared a deep resonance with Neoplatonist beliefs about the lesser nature of material reality and the idea that the truth lies deeply inside us, in the most spiritual part of our beings.
  - From his time with the Manicheans and with Neoplatonism he learned an appreciation of contemplation and a deep suspicion of noise and turbulence.
  - He also acquired the idea that “behind” this world there is another, truer, deeper one; so we must resist the idea that our sensory experience is exhaustive of all reality.
- Augustine’s time with the Manicheans and his Platonism more broadly receive the blame for his perceived dualism; that is, his putative belief that people are souls embedded in bodies that are strictly speaking accidental to their being and his hostility to the idea that the material world is worth much.

- Ultimately Augustine was unsatisfied by Manicheism. In Milan he met Ambrose, its Neoplatonist Christian bishop, and found a congenial way of being Christian. He converted and was baptized in 387.



St. Ambrose and Saint Augustine

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## Urban Monasticism

- North African Christians of Augustine's day measured moral and religious seriousness by suffering and endurance. It was a good context for thinking of the Christian life as one of ascetic commitment. He set up a religious community in Thagaste, living an austere life of prayer, poverty, and community.
  - His monasticism was not traditional: He chose the city instead of the desert. His decision meant he thought the intensity of the dedicated religious life was best carried out amid the noise and bustle, where the monks could be seen and known.
  - Augustine had a deep suspicion of private property and privacy in general and insisted on holding things in common as a community and on being open about his own and his community's weaknesses, believing that perhaps others could be dissuaded from repeating their errors if they saw the consequences.
- In 391, Augustine was compelled to accept ordination as a priest, with the clear intent that he become the new bishop of Hippo Regius. He would be bishop, but he would remain monastic; he moved his religious community to Hippo and lived within it throughout his life.

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## Development as Writer, Teacher, and Theologian

- Augustine led a busy life, writing constantly—treatises, commentaries, letters, and hundreds of sermons. As bishop he was a prominent citizen and public figure and gained a first-order acquaintance with small-town politics and the complexities of the region and, over time, the whole shape of the empire.
- As bishop, Augustine remained a teacher, committed to transforming his audience's affections, believing that theology was accessible to all if the theologian took care to render his language intelligible to ordinary folk.

- › Furthermore, as that sort of teacher, and as one who lived a vocation of communality and public openness about his own weaknesses, Augustine taught a radical Christianity that, along with disavowing private property, insisted that the full vocation of the Christian life could be lived out in the ordinary life of the everyday person.

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## Donatists and Pelagians

- In Augustine's lifetime, the North African Christian churches were split into two factions:
  - › Christians whose leaders had collaborated in the imperial persecutions a century earlier.
  - › Christians whose leaders broke communion with the collaborators. These churches were called Donatist, after one of their leaders.
- The crucial division was whether toleration of morally corrupt people had limits. The Donatists wanted to draw clear lines and hold them absolutely; the churches Augustine joined believed that stance was unforgiving. Augustine's signal accomplishment was to convince the Roman authorities to break the will of the Donatist leaders.
- Augustine's writings sparked the Pelagian controversy, which began in the 400s and has never really left the western Christian churches since.
  - › Pelagius, a British monk, thought Augustine's emphasis on the priority of grace deflated the urgency of individuals' moral striving, effaced individual responsibility, and degraded human dignity.
  - › Augustine thought Pelagius didn't understand the actual nature of God's saving work or the direness of the human condition after the fall.

- › The debate between them, and then between Pelagius's disciples and Augustine, continued for the rest of his life.

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## Final Years

- The end of the Donatist controversy, the beginning of the Pelagian controversy, and the beginning of the writing of *The City of God* converged: The controversy came to its climax and resolution in the Council of Carthage in 411, in which Augustine played a prominent role.
  - › He began writing *The City of God* in late 411 or 412, and kept at it, though often distracted by other work, until he completed it in 426 or 427.
- › The remaining few years of his life were just as busy as the earlier ones, and he kept on writing, teaching, and even occasionally preaching up to a few weeks before his death, on August 28, 430, with the Vandals besieging Hippo.

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## Sources of Misinterpretation

- Augustine's dealings with the Donatists and the Pelagians and his overall practice in the office of bishop constitute the source for his critics' charge that he is antidemocratic, an authoritarian who gave the highest moral imprimatur for the Inquisition. In fact, in his role as a leader of the Latin Christian churches, he was anything but authoritarian. As a bishop, he continued teaching an anti-authoritarian vision of the Gospel, one that was deeply suspicious of figures such as himself.
- Because Augustine overshadows most other historical figures, we forget the human Augustine and imagine the saint. No post-apostolic thinker has been invoked more successfully—or, paradoxically, more variously—to authorize the western church's teachings.

- The churches today have “learned” many things by having them authorized by citations from Augustine’s texts. But what the churches have learned and what Augustine meant to teach need not be the same thing.
  - No other thinker is as rhetorically supple, or as alert to his audience’s expectations. He was a Christian Platonist monastic; a living church father; a savvy civic and ecclesiastical administrator; judge, advocate, and jury; author, reader, preacher, and teacher; philosopher and anti-philosopher.
  - He was never content with his last formulation of a particular issue. His thought reveals a continuous dynamism and flexibility of style, tone, and even argument that makes his position on many matters very hard to pin down.
  - We have treated his books as canonical, and they fossilized into something like divine writ. Augustine feared that people would find in his books whatever they wanted to find, and he tried to stop that from happening. And he mostly failed.

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## Why Read Augustine Now

- Consider where he stands in the history of philosophy: He lived roughly 800 years after Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and roughly 800 years before Aquinas, and there are roughly 800 years between Aquinas and today. Augustine marked the transition between ancient and medieval philosophy.
  - In terms of political thought, to read *The City of God* forces you to grapple with multiple interpretations of that book, rival readings whose alternatives structure much of the history of political thought in the West.
  - Augustine helps us better understand our past. Even non-Christians can find usefulness in understanding this most influential of Christian imaginations of the cosmos, of political order, and of the meaning of history.



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## Reflections for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

- Consider that we stand at the end of “Christendom” if we understand that term as the effort to shape and sustain civilization on explicitly Christian terms. This is so in two senses, one well-known, the other not.
  - The well-known sense is clear. Christendom is over. We have largely left that ambition behind. The status of religious beliefs—their legitimacy in public, and the sincerity with which we try to organize our lives through them—is more contested and far more fragile and recognizably contingent than ever before.
  - The less well-known sense is more surprising: If, in one way, Christendom is over, in another way Christendom has been accomplished. Many contemporary secular practices, categories, and judgments are in fact Christian. The Christian language is removed, but the deep Christian structure remains in the universalism of our moral ideals, the concept of the individual, the tension between our public and our private lives.
- For Christians, Augustine’s work offers clues about how to be authentically Christian. His vision of what is asked by faith retains some of North Africa’s hardness and some of its vehemence as well. For those who are not Christian, Augustine’s was the last generation before the 20th century to genuinely grapple with a religiously pluralistic society and in that condition, he has lessons for us all.

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## Questions to Consider

1. Augustine was a convert. How might his experience have given him insight into the different ways of being human (pagan and Christian)? How might it have blinded him to aspects of each?
  2. He was also a public figure, but also deeply confessional of his private inner life. How do you think he related his public vocation to his private confessions?
-

# The Sack of Rome, 410 A.D.

If the end of the world has a beginning, we could do far worse than date it to August 24–26, 410 A.D., when Alaric and the Visigoths entered the city of Rome. Almost as soon as it occurred, the Sack of Rome left the space of history and entered the realm of myth. It is in a very real way foundational for the apocalyptic imagination of the west. When we try to depict the end of life as we know it, the outcome turns out to be remarkably like what we imagine the sack of Rome to have been.

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## The Thrilling Myth

- Imagine that you live in an empire that has lasted 1,000 years. In that time, almost all other civilizations have been incorporated into it. Its people are prosperous, its cities magnificent, its lands secure. You know of no people, no kingdom, that equals it in greatness—indeed there is little beyond its boundaries to compare. It seems that human society and the empire are bound up in one another.
- Now imagine that in your lifetime, that empire is invaded from the outside by barbarians—people in some sense uncivilized, not quite lawless, but rather operating on a very primitive set of laws that could never suffice to govern a society as sophisticated as yours. They ravage your countryside, besiege and sack your towns and cities, and finally reach the capital of your empire—the greatest city ever known, the center of the world—and overrun it.
- Such was the situation facing the Roman world when Augustine began to write *The City of God*. Augustine writes in the wake of chaos, attempting to accept what has happened and to learn

from it, to see what it can teach us, what use we can make of our sufferings, and to what end we may direct the essentially unjust acts that we must enact upon others.

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## The Mundane Truth

- The historical facts are in no doubt, but they have only passing relationship with our imagination.
  - First, by the time of the sack, Rome had not been the actual capital of the *Imperium Romanum*—in the sense of the main city of the emperor—for more than a century. Constantine had moved the center of rule to Constantinople in 330; even earlier, the western emperor administered the west from Mediolanum (Milan), and at the time of the sack itself, from Ravenna.
  - Second, the Visigoths who sacked the city were not giant, ignorant cavemen wearing animal skins and wielding unsheathed swords and massive axes. They entered the empire with their families as refugees from the Huns in 376. By the 400s they were themselves Arian Christians and well informed about civilization and its attractions.
  - The initial welcome the authorities offered them in 376 rapidly wore out. There was famine, and the Romans decided to end their threat. A climactic but calamitous battle was fought against them in 378 near Adrianople, in what is now European Turkey. The Roman defeat was total; Emperor Valens himself died either in or soon after the battle. The new emperor, Theodosius, signed a treaty with the Visigoths, letting them settle in Thrace and turning them from enemies within the borders to a rich source of mercenary military power for the empire.
- After Theodosius's death in 395, the youngish Alaric became headman of the Visigoths, and they again became unwelcome, a nomadic people harassed by the locals and harried by imperial troops wherever they went. Eventually they arrived in

late 408 under the walls of Rome. Twenty months of negotiations and Machiavellian realpolitik followed, full of missed chances, foiled plans, folly, and sheer stupid accident.

- In the end, through the mysteries of accident, obscure motives surprisingly inflected by unforeseen forces, and a thousand other micro-causes, Rome's almost millennium-long luck ran out. The Visigoths sacked the city for three days. The sack ended on Alaric's command, and the Visigoths marched south, looting along their line of march, hoping to winter in Africa. Alaric died, Ataulf took over, and the Goths marched north again into Gaul, finally settling in Aquitaine.



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## The Aftermath

- The belief that the Roman Empire had entered a glorious new era with the imperial conversions to Christianity in the fourth century had secured for many people two narratives.
  - One, for Christians, was the story of the triumph of Christianity in Rome, classically told by Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History*.
  - The other, for pagans, was the aging and decline of Roman power. But as much as this latter narrative did not approve of

the course the empire was taking, it could not really imagine the empire would end, or that its sacred precincts would be violated.

- The people for whom the sack was most disastrous—and the people who had the largest voice in recording its details for posterity—were the upper-class survivors and victims who had lost the most in the sack itself. But for most people, the sack had little direct effect on their lives. Yet many people across the Mediterranean world were shocked by the sack, both psychologically and ideologically.
- Why did the sack have this effect? To understand, you have to know at least a little about how Romans saw the world and the spaces outside their imperium, as well as how they saw their imperium itself.

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## Imperium

- The *Imperium Romanum* was where the Romans were obeyed. There were many different ways to issue commands, and to obey them, but the key was obedience, not necessarily direct and continuous control. The Roman idea of *limes*, of “limits,” at this time was understood to signify how far Rome would go out, not a set of borders (rivers and walls) that Rome would be safe within.
- People still believed that after the turbulence of the third-century “crisis” of the empire, and with the conversion of Constantine, there would be newfound peace and stability within the borders and a just and omnipotent God would oversee the imperium’s security. Certainly there was no thought that the barbarians would ever invade the empire, or that they would even want to.
- The imperium, with the awkward exception of the complicated and often-ignored Persian Empire to its east, was not surrounded by rival states, but by wilderness. It did not have borders; it had frontiers.

There was in an important sense no boundary to the imperium; there was only the edge of where Rome had deigned to reach.

- Furthermore, the imperium was a cosmopolitan empire, enabling travel and encouraging trade across thousands of miles and between wildly different peoples. In an age of very limited travel, the imperium was a community of unprecedentedly diverse ways of being human.
- Romans' humanitarian and cosmopolitan self-understanding was manifest in how they governed conquered peoples with a combination of liberality and brutality. They were religiously and culturally tolerant, but politically fascist. Once conquered, a people could do almost anything they wanted, so long as they did a minimal number of things in the Roman way.
- Romans saw the barbarians as we might see Neanderthals—sharing a great deal with us, but fundamentally another kind of creature altogether. But the barbarians turned out to be other than what the Romans had complacently expected them to be, and once they started moving in during the late fourth century, the Romans' ignorant contempt for all those outside their imperium changed from mild amusement to increasingly paranoid alarm.

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## Change and the Rise of Christianity

- It wasn't just that the sack of Rome challenged ideas throughout the Mediterranean about who the barbarians were and who they themselves were. It also challenged their notion of crisis, for this was a new kind of crisis altogether.
- Rome's history of success had erased the idea of failure. Quite literally, they had no historical analogy for what was coming. Historically, one civilization had replaced another, but there was no memory of any collapse of civilization itself. Thinkers had developed the idea of cyclical visions of civilizational hegemony,

but no real apocalypse, no real idea of a “dark age.” No one thought in terms of the end of their world.

- Another point was that they already felt their world was changing, in two ways.
  - First, the Romans of Augustine’s day felt a deep sense of a lost moral integrity. Everywhere they looked, the past stood in mutely eloquent rebuke to the present. The memory of greatness, with all moral murkiness sanded away, provoked a poignant despair to Romans viewing their present situation. They were haunted by the memory of republican glory; the memorial statues and monuments scattered across the empire’s cities made the absence of heroism more palpable and painful and their consciences at their own moral decline all the more guilty.
  - Additionally, the rise of Christianity was a genuinely new thing: the emergence of an empire-wide religion that sought to convert all people, of different nationalities and of all social classes to a new moral and spiritual posture that was possibly fundamentally alien to traditional Roman mores.
- The Romans could accommodate the idea of different peoples, with their different rituals and beliefs, and they were eager to incorporate new kinds of human cultures within their empire. But they required all the peoples to fit inside the Roman categories, not to challenge the terms on which Rome understood the world. In their evangelism, the Christians mixed groups and classes of people in ways that the Romans found deeply disturbing.



*Romans’ humanitarian and cosmopolitan self-understanding was manifest in how they governed conquered peoples with a combination of liberality and brutality.*



- › First, they were both like and unlike the Jews the Romans had already encountered. The Christians were monotheists, but they seemed to think that their God should be the God for everybody now, not at some point in the future.
  - › Also the Christians were pretty clear that their loyalty to the imperium was less important than their loyalty to their *Christos*, and that Christ had shown them what they should do when the two loyalties conflicted.
  - › Finally, the Christians became a pretty apocalyptic group, with expectations for the imminent and radical transformation of the world. Nothing is less welcome to a hegemonic political power than an ideology that says the moral shape of the cosmos is designed to undo that hegemony.
- So it was not precisely the sack of Rome in 410 that provoked Augustine to compose *The City of God*, but the shock it gave the elite—Christian and pagan alike—which was the catalyst that crystallized their concerns. They were already anxious, yet pretty much unprepared. When the shock came, it synthesized a number of forces and arguments running under the surface of the late imperial world. How Augustine came to understand the task he had accepted as, in some sense, a civilization-saving undertaking is the subject of the next lecture.

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### Questions to Consider

1. Can you imagine a major public figure responding to a contemporary calamity in the way that Augustine responded to the Sack of Rome? What form would such a response take? Imagine an Augustinian response to 9/11 or the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004.
  2. What place or symbol of significance for us might be analogous to Rome's role in the Empire?
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# Augustine's Pagan and Christian Audience

## Lecture 4

“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” This line, uttered by the third-century North African theologian Tertullian, has echoed down the centuries in Christian thought. Tertullian meant to contrast Christian faith to Greek rationalist philosophy. For him, the questions and attitudes popular among skeptical philosophical types were anathema to the absolute truths of Christian dogma. He asserted that the two approaches were utterly opposed and insisted on affirming Christianity without regard for human reason. The question of conflict between reason and faith has remained alive ever since to haunt Christian theologians and as ammunition to non-Christians.

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### The Problem of Civic Morality

- In the context of the writing of *The City of God*, Augustine knew that his audience, Christian and pagan alike, was asking a slightly different version of Tertullian's question: What has Rome to do with Jerusalem? Augustine shaped his book to answer that question. In no other of his works was his audience as richly diverse.
- The first sentence of the book is an answer to a request from one Marcellinus, a Christian tribune and notary under the western emperor Honorius. He was a major Roman player and a friend to Augustine, who dedicated *The City of God* to him. Many years later, Augustine recalled Marcellinus's prompt: In the last paragraph of Book 22, 15 years after Marcellinus's death, Augustine describes the completion of the work as recompense for a debt he had accepted long ago.

- We can trace the origins of that debt pretty clearly. In the winter of 411–12, Marcellinus reported to Augustine his difficulties in responding to Roman refugees still devoted to the old gods, who angrily blamed the Christians for the sack of Rome and all the *imperium's* problems.
- According to Marcellinus, Volusianus, a pagan Roman nobleman considering conversion, was wavering. Volusianus worried that Christ's teachings about returning good for evil and turning the other cheek were incompatible with the morals of citizenship, and Marcellinus wanted to know how to respond.
- Augustine suggested that the crucial point is that "a city [is] but a group of men united by a specific bond of peace," and such a peace was secured best by those with the proper disposition. Recognizing that much of the Christian morality was not immediately applicable to public affairs, he argued that Christianity's theological virtues were in fact a *better* basis for the civic virtues than paganism—that rather than disabling civic virtue, they properly enable it. This passage succinctly expresses how Augustine imagined morality to relate to politics, an idea developed much more fully in *The City of God*.

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## The Challenge of Diversity

- The foregoing exchange is but one example of the diverse audience Augustine had in mind in writing *The City of God*. The various challenges by his enemies forced him to articulate carefully his theological views. Further, he imaginatively entered into their worldviews, apprehending both their insights and what made them worry about his own views. Consider the range of audiences Augustine confronted:
  - › Civic-minded Roman patriots assumed that whatever happiness humans are to have, we will have in this life. They believed in the basic decency of Roman tradition, including the various political and religious ritual practices and cultural



Augustine's City of God is a work of Christian philosophy. It is a response to the pagan philosophers of antiquity, particularly Plato and Aristotle. Augustine argues that the City of God is a spiritual entity, not a physical one. It is a community of people who are united by their love of God and their pursuit of truth. The City of God is not a place, but a people. It is a people who are united by their love of God and their pursuit of truth. The City of God is not a place, but a people. It is a people who are united by their love of God and their pursuit of truth.

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A page from *The City of God* by Augustine of Hippo

forms that Augustine found morally and spiritually abhorrent. Augustine's debate with these voices dominates and orders the first five books.

- Philosophically minded elite Romans who sought wisdom and happiness through retreat into solitude and contemplation—people whom Augustine perceived as tragically prideful, meriting pity more than scorn. He primarily engages them in books six through ten.
- Even within the largely Christian confines of North Africa, many interlocutors contested with him. The Donatist dispute had begun to recede, but it had convinced Augustine that the church must frankly admit its constitution as a mixed group on the way to salvation, not a fortress of righteousness against an irredeemably sinful outside world.

- › The Pelagians, a small group of Christian intellectuals, often at least as educated and at least as elite as Augustine, found his vision of the nature of human sin and the need for divine grace to be theologically confused and spiritually and psychologically distasteful.
- › Christians who would probably never read *The City of God*, but who might hear their bishop or priest quote it in a sermon, were the people Augustine was most afraid of misleading, especially as the work continues into the latter books, into thinking they could trust him to do their thinking for them.
- Part of the power of the work, in its own time and thereafter, lies in how it heard these diverse concerns and how Augustine's sheer rhetorical and argumentative genius braided them together in its pages.

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## Theological View of Empire

- Augustine used the sack of Rome to rethink the meaning of Rome itself and to address fundamental themes of civic life in general. Knowing that pagan suspicion of Christians was not entirely unfounded, he used that civic upheaval to offer a new vision of how Christians ought to behave in the world. These themes are clear in a sermon of Augustine's that may mark his earliest response to the sack of Rome, in spring 411:
  - › Physical suffering and death are not the greatest evils; those who think they are should meditate on Hell. God uses historical traumas to sort the blessed from the damned, so we should see suffering as training and learn to use it.
  - › The fall of Rome was not a world-changing event. The human condition remains the same no matter what the political situation and will remain so until the end of time. Rome was "corrected not destroyed" by the violence.

- There was no golden age of Rome. Roman rule and the empire it had gained were facts about the world, as much theological as political. All empires are eventually held accountable under God's sovereignty, for every empire eventually falls into the idolatry of self-worship.
- This theological interpretation of empire gives Augustine tremendous critical leverage—now the argument is not between belief and unbelief, but between rival forms of believing. The problem with Rome was its fusion of this-worldly political order with ultimate transcendent meaning.
- That politics can be misused does not preclude its being rightly used, and Augustine reframes how and why Christians should care for the world as a whole. This point is crucial to *The City of God*: The pagans' challenge to the Christians went far beyond the sack of Rome. They doubted Christians could care for the world at all because Christians were always seeking to look beyond it. The title of the work is meant to bring all these concerns to the fore: to suggest a kind of complicated relationship between Creation and Creator, eternal and temporal.

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### From *Civitas* to *Civitate Dei*

- As a rhetorician, Augustine was sensitive to the construction of persuasive arguments. That includes the title of the work (in Latin, *De Civitate Dei*) and continues in the first word and sentence of the work as a whole.
- First is the highly important use of the word *civitas*, one of the most central political terms of the pagan world. The Roman government understood itself not as controlling a homogeneous terrain but as coordinating a collective of cities. Just as the Romans offered an urban politics for a rural countryside, so Augustine wrote a Christian urban theology for a primarily rural audience.

- The Greek Christian theologian Eusebius had baptized the language of *empire* as a legitimately Christian term; but the language of *city* was far more central to pagan political thought. So Augustine's use of the phrase was, in its context, noteworthy and even a bit jarring.
- Augustine defines city as an intentional community. It is also a theological community. Augustine thinks the church is a real city, a real community formed by love, yet not perfectly visible on earth. It is incompletely manifest in the imperfect lives of its members.
- *The City of God* is at one and the same time an ecclesial, a civic, and an existential work.
  - It is ecclesial in how it elucidates the inner nature of Christian communal life, what it means to be a Christian among others, trying to live a life of fellowship and inquiry.
  - It is civic in how it describes the real value and dangerous idolatries of worldly politics, how it clarifies our real duties to the civic order, and how those duties can be overridden by other duties.
  - It is existential in how it explains why we live in this world, what God is doing to us in and through it, and how we ought best to inhabit it in order most clearly to hear God's voice and receive God's love.
- The first sentence contains the master themes of the whole book: the tension between time and eternity and between the obscurities of worldly justice and ultimate divine judgment; the role of believers' patience in waiting for these tensions to be relieved; the impudence of the unbelievers who prefer their own gods; and the need in all things of God's help.

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## The Power of Glory

- Above all, though, shines the first word, *gloriosissimam*, “most glorious.” If the Roman political imagination was an imagination of cities, the Romans’ imagination of the good life is organized centrally around *glory*. Whatever Romans did, they did out of a longing for glory.
- *Gloria* traditionally described the aim of those who sought to gain renown. As such, *gloria* shines the light of heroism on its possessors, but it is awarded by those who witness and remember their deeds. It is not, in pagan Roman understanding, a self-generated reality: it is a matter of recognition.
- Before Augustine, Christians, fearing that *gloria* suggested that God needs human recognition, considered it improper. It was only recently that Latin theologians began to talk about *gloria* as the substance of God, something not bestowed by observers but recognized as emanating from the inner life of the divine. To start the work with *gloriosissimam* was to trail a red cloak to the pagans.
- Thus part of the contest of the work will be about whose sense of glory is the right one: the Romans’, spoken from the perspective of a conqueror, or the Christians’, spoken of the person of a merciful God? What is the nature of the ultimate glory of the world—is it the mercy we enact, or the mercy God gives us, and the humility that we in turn return to God?

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## Questions to Consider

1. Augustine says that Christians’ attitudes toward worldly commitment make them better able to handle the challenges of political life. How does he think this works? Do you agree?
2. Augustine is reasonably sanguine about the inescapability of human “empires” in this world, though he is quite damning of them in practice. Describe the tension here: What does it suggest about the relative value of political life in his thinking?

# The Problem of Suffering (Book 1)

Augustine begins *The City of God* by engaging Roman expectations for happiness. Using the sack of Rome to contrast pagan and Christian responses to suffering, he sees a revealing difference in their understanding of the world and our place within it. He focuses here on the civic-minded Romans' belief that the happiness of human life might be found centrally in this world—that we can build a secure fortress of felicity in history. Augustine thinks this is tragically mistaken.

## The Classical Worldview

- Modern thought offers two ways of imagining the ancient world:
  - First is the imagination of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, of the classical world as grand, magnificent, calm, and orderly. Christianity is missing from it. This vision sees the coming of Christianity as a collapse, the coming of the "Dark Ages." Edward Gibbon is the greatest proponent of this view, still the commonly accepted one.
  - In the second view, the classical world is full



Friedrich Nietzsche



of unbridled passion, divine enthusiasm, madness, great cruelty, and great achievement. This is the view of Nietzsche, a classicist before he was a philosopher, who indicted the educators of his age for failing to grasp the psychological profundity of the classical world. For Nietzsche, Christianity is not a light cloak we can throw off and return to our classical roots. There is no going back. There is no rebirth. There is only going forward in full cognizance of all that has made us.

- The Romans were not like contemporary secularist thinkers. They were deeply religious and deeply passionate, and their morality was real, though much of it we would find terrifyingly inhuman. Are there limits to our humanist identification with one another? How far can we identify with people radically different from us? Or are they so radically different after all?
- The following two facts about the Romans, Christian and pagan, make them simultaneously like us and not:
  - On the one hand, they fully understood religious and metaphysical skepticism. The elites of Rome were just as able as we are to imagine that religion is stories made up by people long ago whose human origins are forgotten in time.
  - On the other hand, they had a vision of moral order that we would find shocking. They were very comfortable with extreme violence, deployed publicly. When Augustine talks about the theater, he is not talking about people putting on sensitive plays by Shakespeare. He is talking about sex shows and snuff films, performed live and on stage, and this is only the surface of what the Romans were willing to countenance in the way of morality, public and private.
- Understanding these views of morality helps us to see these first five books as Augustine's engagement with the most common aspects of Rome's popular culture—what the people were taught to love, and what to fear—and the political consequences

of that. The vision of Rome that emerges from these books is a terrifying one.

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## The Inequity of Suffering

- Suffering is so pervasive in our world, so powerful in our experience, and so perplexing and vexing to our expectations that any belief in or hope for secure happiness in this world is always a delusion. The question for Augustine is, once we see that suffering is unavoidable, what are we going to do about it?
- Augustine offers a direct response to the immediate challenge posed by the sack of Rome—the inequity of unmerited suffering—and answers pagan accusations that the sack itself was evidence against the Christians’ faith in the providential governance of a loving God.
- Yet, a more fundamental question is the problem of evil, suffering, and the discrepancy between our moral expectations of the world and what the world provides. Augustine suggests that the question was not why innocents suffer, but:
  - Why, on Christian terms, does suffering happen?
  - What should humans do when such sufferings are inflicted upon them?
- Suffering is common to our human condition. The dilemma is why people suffer to the degree that they do, and why people do not suffer fairly—that is, why some good people



*Augustine answers that the key is wrong attachment to the world, and the question should be what use we make of suffering. No one is righteous; no one properly appreciates the world as it should be appreciated, and therefore all find suffering in their interactions with it.*



suffer a great deal and some nasty people do not. What can we say about suffering?

- Augustine answers that the key is wrong attachment to the world, and the question should be what use we make of suffering. No one is righteous; no one properly appreciates the world as it should be appreciated, and therefore all find suffering in their interactions with it.
- How, then does one respond to a world that seems immune to the wish to avoid suffering? Before we can get to an answer, Augustine thinks, we must inspect pagan attitudes to these issues, to assess their plausibility, and to see whether we need to expel their assumptions from our own minds.

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## The Problem of Suicide

- Augustine wants to explain why Christians, and humans in general should think suicide is never acceptable, that suffering is to be endured, not avoided through self-annihilation. He draws this conclusion through a discussion of what he insinuates is the uttermost form of cruelty—that of convincing another of complicity in his or her own annihilation, particularly through rape.
- The Romans saw suicide as eminently acceptable in certain circumstances. If life were to become unendurable, morally or physically, it is wholly reasonable to seek to escape it. In fact, the blood of select suicides was a crucial ingredient in the metaphorical mortar of Rome.
- Lucretia and Cato, the alpha and omega of Roman republican history, were both suicides who sacrificed themselves for the good of the city. Both were memorialized as noble and brave heroes in subsequent Roman memory. Yet Augustine uses these examples as revealing deep tensions and contradictions in pagan

values: Lucretia died clearly as a response to social shame, and Cato died clearly out of childish spite.

- For the Romans, Cato's suicide was not a momentary and impassioned act of despair. It was a cold-blooded and deliberate act of supremely significant speech. It was a way of expressing contempt for Caesar, and it created an impossible bind for all who survived him and who understood his act and admired it: If they agreed and admired Cato's will, then they should kill themselves too.



*In Augustine's Christian approach, to face suffering and not flinch or try to escape it by suicide is simply to face the destiny God has granted you.*

- Lucretia is an even more complicated figure. A victim of rape, she usurped the role of judge and condemned herself to death, equating rape with adultery. Romans who idolize her, Augustine says, must choose between affirming that she was right to put herself to death, and thus calling her an adulterer, or denying she was right to put herself to death, and thus implying she was a self-murderer.
- In short, the traditional Roman attitude was that evil was to be endured, so long as there was some logic to it that made sense, such as Rome or gaining glory for oneself. But when it became unendurable, suicide was acceptable. For Augustine this approach deeply misconstrues the nature of our world and the character of our responsibility to ourselves and to the God who made us. It is an incoherent strategy of escape or avoidance.



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## Suffering as Grace

- In Augustine's Christian approach, to face suffering and not flinch or try to escape it by suicide, is simply to face the destiny

God has granted you. Although some suffering you deserve for what you do; some may help heal you; and some may be offered as a chance to glorify God as a martyr. But he does not enthusiastically endorse suffering as a simple good. Suffering can be made instrumentally good, but it is not intrinsically so.

- Suffering is meted out by God in ways that seem utterly random and illogical to us, because we simply don't share God's point of view. God has a plan that is not visible to God's people in its details. So Christians should affirm there is a moral order, but must confess its obscurity to their understanding.
- Suffering is something Christians can acknowledge, confront, and hope to comfort, if not heal.
- Augustine is offering a version of what we may call the therapy of suffering. This therapy has two senses:
  - In the first, it aims to help us overcome suffering by attempting to recover a sense of our own agency in the face of harm. Suffering here appears as a trauma we must try to comprehend for the sake of our own wholeness. While this is an ongoing and imperfect process, we must always insist that suffering, while real, is not the ultimate truth of our situation.
  - The second and more controversial sense tries to help us see suffering as itself therapeutic, offering an opportunity to reset our values, to discover what we should really care about and what we have been mistaken in caring about. Here suffering helps us by teaching us a positive lesson about the value of our release from excessive affections or wrongly attuned attachments. In seeing it this way, we attempt to recover and reaffirm the agency lost in suffering. It is thus essentially empowering: By resisting the temptation to victimhood, we attempt to find in suffering God's presence, to which we are called to respond.

- None of this aims to exonerate God—God’s righteousness is presumed here—but rather to figure out what humans can do, how to respond to such absurd suffering without appealing to the arid calculus of merit. Nor should this encourage us to seek out more suffering. We need not pursue further suffering, but what suffering we encounter we should seek to use to our advantage.
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### Questions to Consider

1. Can evil be used rightly? Are there some kinds of evil that cannot be turned to the benefit of those who suffer it? If so, what does that mean for Augustine’s proposal?
  2. Augustine thinks that the true evil of war is spiritual, not physical. Do you agree?
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# The Price of Empire

## (Books 2–3)

### Lecture 6

**A**fter beginning in book 1 with the challenge of the problem of evil and the Christian response to it, in book 2 Augustine turns to the task that will occupy the rest of part 1—the dismantling of the Romans’ sense of themselves, their overall worldview. He begins by striking at the center of Rome’s self-understanding: its self-congratulatory story about how it got to be so awesome, why the Romans deserve their empire. Like all people who enjoy benefits throughout history, the Romans constructed elaborate stories justifying what they enjoyed.

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### The Glory That Was Rome

- Augustine recognized that the Romans’ self-regard arose from nostalgia for an idyllic time of simplicity and virtue deep in the Roman past. But the success of the Roman Empire had little to do with noble virtues of simpler times and a lot to do with earlier Romans’ luck, paranoia, greed, and organizing principle for their lives and their city: *libido dominandi*, the “lust to dominate” that is also the “dominating lust.”
- For Augustine the corollary to the question of suffering was how humans could find happiness in this world. Many Romans believed that they could achieve enduring and secure happiness through individual heroism or greatness or through overall societal or worldly progress.
- The most powerful and popular formulation of this view is that Rome, as a liberally minded empire bringing *humanitas*, civilizing customs, a cosmopolitan mindset, and vast transcontinental

trade could actually work over time to make the world a fit place for human habitation.

- › Rome had a civilizing mission. Whereas most ancient empires had been effectively vehicles for plunder, the Romans actually *spent* money on their conquests, bringing them roads and good plumbing, a legal system, and participation in a cosmopolitan pan-Mediterranean economy.
- › Rome understood itself to have a calling to civilize the barbarian north and render less decadent the Greek east. Rome served the rest of the world. That was the grandeur of Rome.

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## Changing Perception

- Augustine's goal was to get his audience to treat these stories a little more skeptically and to see Rome as a different reality from what they had been taught. Instead of being providentially guided by the traditional gods, Rome's rise was based on the seduction of the Romans:
  - › Most immediately their seduction by their own self-love.
  - › More distantly their seduction by a lust for power.
  - › Most distantly—though for Augustine decisively—their seduction by the demons who tempted them and who were themselves seduced by a fantasy of escape from and even dominion over the Creator God.
- Whereas the history of Rome had been told as a story of rising greatness and increasing happiness, Augustine wants to retell it

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as a story of series of calamities for all involved, especially the Romans.

- Augustine's opponents are in this endeavor are the Roman pagans, who criticize the Christians for being anti-worldly and who affirm the ancient virtues of Roman rule—*imperium*, *gloria*, *virtus*—and hold heroic civic-mindedness as their ideal.
- Yet Rome had had no real threatening enemies for centuries and faced little but civil war. The memory of republican self-rule was more a goad to an ever-guilty conscience than it was any actual longing.
- Augustine assaulted their self-image and their story about their own history with all the cunning and vigor that the barbarians had shown in warfare, asking:
  - What is the nature of the Roman state?
  - How and why should we respect it?
  - What has fallen in the sack of Rome?
  - What, precisely, was Rome? The traditional pagan story offered a very simple answer: *glory and justice*.
- In the first book of Cicero's *De re Publica*, Scipio describes a commonwealth as "an assembly united in fellowship by common agreement as to what is right and a community of interest." Later in the dialogue Cicero has Scipio ask rhetorically "what is a society except a partnership in justice?"
- Augustine makes a two-pronged attack on this picture of Rome:
  - First he offers a definitional attack on politics itself: Romans are mistaken about what constitutes a state. If a polity is defined by a community of justice, and if justice is a matter of all "beings" receiving their due, then the first agent to whom

justice must be given is God. Therefore, justice demands the worship of the true God.

- Second, taking the details from Roman historians themselves, he offers a powerful critique of the nostalgic picture of the past. The antique Romans never were the simple, morally integrated, stern farmer heroes of legend. According to Sallust, who believed that the threat of Carthage was what had kept Rome virtuous, Romans were focused by fear and made dissolute by security.
- This picture made Augustine deeply skeptical of any proclamations of moral purity or innocence and helped him to identify, diagnose, and resist the vestiges of belief in that innocence among his contemporaries.

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## The Pursuit of Happiness

- For pagan thinkers, happiness—true human flourishing—was to be found as a citizen of a human city, such as Rome. This idea is effectively a morality of patriotism: A man exercises his virtuousness (manly power) to gain *imperium* (rule, domination), which gives him and his city *gloria* (splendor).
- For Augustine, this thinking is historically and psychologically deluded.
  - First, consider the physical sufferings and deaths that eventuated from the Romans' domination over the known world. The civil wars Rome suffered over the centuries were more ferocious and bloody than any barbarian sack. To hold onto their belief that the way to be happy is through civic greatness, the Romans are compelled to forget their own history.
  - Worse than the Romans' blindness to their history of physical evils is that they see only physical evils, and not the larger and more profound moral evils surrounding and enabling them.

They are more afraid of suffering physical pain than of the corruption of their souls.

- › Dissolution is harm inflicted upon the self, a kind of suicide. Because humans belong not simply to ourselves but are works of art that God has wrought, we owe to God a basic respect that does not insult the gift that God has given us.
- › Depravity exemplifies the religious impiety of those who are drawn to worldly delights. Augustine draws parallels between human dissolution and that of the fallen angels who try to seduce us into sin and servility to their will.
- › The end state of the depraved is as much a theological concept as a political one. It encourages self-indulgence and fantasy, which in turn reinforce the belief that domination is the only way we can truly be happy. Once we become people for whom happiness amounts to nothing but the immediate satisfaction of our basest desires, we inevitably begin to treat our gods as we treat our servants.
- This debased and dissolute vision of happiness is exhibited in the public spectacles and dramas the Romans put on and flocked to see. Two points are important to understand Augustine's complaints about the spectacles and the performances.
  - › Roman spectacles often involved real violence, inertly witnessed by the audience. He was against rape and murder with real blood spraying the audience.
  - › Spectacles were more than entertainment. They were explicitly rituals, civic and religious at once, that attempted to express something of deep importance to the citizens.
- Instead of these perverse entertainments, Augustine offers the spectacles that God provides—the wonders of Creation, the glorious stories of saints and martyrs. The Christian liturgy,

celebrations, feast days, and overall way of life offer a rival set of spectacular entertainments. It is to these true spectacles that we ought to give heed.

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## The Role of Demons

- Demons appear in *The City of God* in a way unlike their portrayal elsewhere in Augustine's writings. They have a functional role in Augustine's depiction of the cosmic and social order; they are active and dynamic forces, seducing humans to their doom. The reality of the demons in Augustine's writing teaches us two lessons worth keeping in mind.
  - First, it underscores how genuinely different was the pagans' vision of the world they inhabited: one full of violent and terrifying deities able to interfere in the most everyday situations.
  - Second, that very readiness to describe the role of demons means they also have an allegorical role as well as exemplifying the sad fate of a fallen and needy rebellious creature in a world where such rebellion can only be futile. The demons serve to exhibit a particular feature of Augustine's depiction of the *libido dominandi*.

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## The Antithesis of Happiness

- Book 3 analyzes and diagnoses the Roman psyche and the character of pagan longing. In it, Augustine uncovers how the Romans' fixation on physical evils and concomitant blindness to moral failings causes them to miss how their very conquests turn into chains.
- The psychological energy driving this enslavement is the *libido dominandi*, a tricky term whose sense we can capture in the ambivalence of the English translation as "dominating lust," the idea of the lust to dominate that is also the lust *that* dominates.

- The idea of *libido dominandi* is susceptible to two sorts of moralistic misreadings, each of which undoes the irony at the heart of the notion.

- One makes the category all about sex. In this reading, the problem is that humans are in the grip of lust and are beasts, in some way sub-human.

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*Demons appear in The City of God in a way unlike their portrayal elsewhere Augustine's writings. They have a functional role in Augustine's depiction of the cosmic and social order; they are active and dynamic forces, seducing humans to their doom.*

● ● ●

- Another makes the category all about violence. In this reading, we are all about subjugation and are devils, perversely super-human.

- Yet for Augustine, the true tenor and terror of the category lies precisely in its indeterminacy between these two meanings.

- The *libido dominandi* can rightly be described as a lust, though in a far broader sense than any reductive sexual categorization; and it can rightly be described as aggression, though again in a far deeper sense than sheer physical abuse.

- Both are forms of longing for a kind of utterly unconstrained agency, both are forms of slavery, and both are both at the same time.

- In fact there is no worldly coherence to the *libido dominandi* because it is theological: the fundamental form of the longing that governs humans after Eden. It is essentially an unstable, ambivalent, and ambiguous desire precisely because the fallen longing it expresses—rebellion against God—is so.

- Finally, Augustine exhorts the pagans to recognize that they have misconceived the proper shape of their desires and the proper means whereby they might satisfy them. Rome's old gods are not gods but demons; the Romans should turn to the true liberty of the City of God, where all the old Roman virtues are transfigured.

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### Questions to Consider

1. Consider Augustine's disagreement with Cicero's definition of a commonwealth. Do you think justice plays an essential role in the idea of a political community? What do you think of Augustine's rejection of this view?
  2. Augustine distinguishes between moral evils and physical evils. Give an example of each. Which does Augustine think is worse? Was Rome beset by one kind of evil more than the other?
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# Augustine's Political Vision (Book 4)

## Lecture 7

Book 4 of *The City of God* asks basic questions about what kind of secure happiness is provided to Rome by its traditional gods. In fact, this happiness is, according to Augustine, an insecure happiness, and so not really any happiness at all. The insecurity itself suggests that the traditional gods are demons who are not in charge of Rome, but who simply encourage the Romans to delude themselves about the providential governance of the one true God.

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### Political Realism

- Once we ask whether Rome's great power has made it happy and see that it has not, the following simple question then presents itself urgently: How did Rome get this way? This question, when investigated, turns out to be three questions:
  - What is the nature of the pseudo-happiness the Romans have been pursuing?
  - How have they convinced themselves that this pseudo-happiness is worth pursuing?
  - What, if anything, can they do about it?
- Augustine's understanding of politics is one of the deepest and most influential facets of his thought. Famous for his dubious view of the pretenses of princes and the dour gaze with which he beheld the preening of empires, he is often associated with the larger tradition of political realism.
- Political realism is either a sober or a pessimistic understanding of the limits and possibilities of politics, depending on whether

you agree with it. Despite the manifest corruptions of Rome that he has himself enumerated and the hideous evils that its growth has inflicted on its own people and the people it has conquered, Augustine has argued clearly that Christians ought to obey the state, provided that the state's demands do not conflict with divine instructions.

- The value of a political state lies not in its intrinsic goodness, but in what it protects you from and in how it secures the peace and good order necessary for everyday human life to proceed. This was all that the state was expected to do in Augustine's age. These were not small goods, and Augustine has reason to say they are enough to warrant Christians' respectful support of the state.
- But putting the empire's main value in plumbing and upkeep of roads rather than achieving glory and domination was likely to make many pagans feel that something was missing from Augustine's rationale. He is inviting his audience into a much more cold-blooded vision of what politics is and could be than they have imagined.
- This attitude leads us to the second level of Augustine's criticism of Rome, one that goes deeper than the facts of Roman history to how much of the ancient world imagines politics. Book 4 offers the first systematic evidence of his political realism: his discussion of what actually keeps worldly political communities together, in which he says that there is no in-principle distinction between gangsters and statesmen.
- In thinking about the politics of the Roman Empire, the first thing to realize is the weakness of the empire's political structures. In this it was no different from any other state before the modern age. Pre-modern and pre-industrial governmental institutions were not large, and while we may think of governments as basically empowering realities, state systems in ancient times did not so much enable citizens' power as disable it.



- The second thing to realize is that the government therefore could not reliably police the social order to meet problems when they arose; they had to manage by indirect deterrence rather than direct coercion. For pre-modern states, the solution was ideology and spectacle.
  - Such states typically spent much more on propaganda such as statues and monuments and feasts and civic rituals than they did on public works—and what public works they did were covered in propaganda.
  - There was a gruesome side as well. Horrific punishments were carried out in public—execution by torture, flogging—often with an audience compelled to watch. They were so gruesome not because people naturally enjoyed such brutality more than today, but because the state had to rely on deterrence.
- The final thing to realize is that a centerpiece of the rationale for the state was freedom, *libertas*. The greatness of the *imperium* was that it made its inhabitants free men. This idea was partly a holdover from the ideology of Republican Rome, but another part seems to have been sincerely believed by the people of the time.
  - Anywhere in the world,  
all a Roman needed to  
say to secure himself  
from harassment or  
indignity was *civis  
Romanus sum*, "I am  
a Roman citizen," and  
he would be free of  
molestation or delay;  
his hearers would know  
that behind him stood  
the weight of all the  
legions, all the glory of  
the whole empire.



*The Romans believed true political  
freedom involved hegemonia,  
domination or command over others:  
Their liberty was defined in crucial  
part by the fact that they held other  
people in bondage.*



- Complicating this freedom was that it was as a zero-sum game: I can have it only if I dominate you. The Romans believed true political freedom involved *hegemonia*, domination or command over others: Their liberty was defined in crucial part by the fact that they held other people in bondage.

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## Political Legitimacy

- Augustine offers a three-pronged attack on the nature of a polity; on the role of the stories that polity tells itself; and on what motivates political actors, whether individual people, communities, nations, or empires.
- First he attacks the ontology—that is, the idea of what constitutes a state and thus what counts as a political community. He denies Cicero's vision of the nature of a city as a common sense of justice, insisting it is not justice but love and, more crassly, appetite that makes a nation move.
  - This notion radically expands, in ways that do not cast a good light on the noble self-presentations of states, the kind of communities that are counted as political communities.
  - It means that political communities are organizations of humans with some generally encompassing common purpose organized to achieve that purpose and allow the members of the community to live as they wish.
  - It evacuates states' claims for a moral legitimacy that marks them out as special and affirms Augustine's statement that kingdoms without justice are little more than large criminal gangs—in Latin *latrocinia*, or rackets.
- Augustine doesn't mean simply that political structures are basically protection rackets, though he most definitely means at least that. More broadly, he means that you can understand both states and criminal gangs as working out of a particular logic. Part

of the logic is appetitive: That is, human communities—in this case, states and gangs—are brought together by positive ends; even in their aversions, they are driven by cupidity: desire for wealth, glory, immortality, power, the status of gods. Augustine gives three examples.

- Alexander the Great comes face to face with a pirate and demands to know how he dares to molest the seas. The pirate replies, "We share a common practice. But because I do it with a small boat, I am labeled a pirate and a thief; while you, with a great navy, molest the whole earth and you are labeled an emperor."



- › The gladiator revolt of Spartacus managed to sustain itself for several years as a hostile community in the heart of Italy itself.
- › Ninus, the mythical founder of Nineveh, was the first to suffer *imperii cupiditate*—lust of rule—and made Assyria in its day larger and greater than the Roman Empire itself.



- What Augustine establishes is not that politics is crime, but that politics is not essentially different from crime and vice versa. To say that politics is nothing but criminal would be a cynical claim, possible only if you imagine that politics could be something other than power-driven.

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But Augustine refuses to imagine that recognition of political reality should cause outrage and disappointment and encourage a belief that some other sort of politics is possible.

- The second part of the attack is a critique of the rhetoric—of the ways that history and symbols, including religions, are used to obscure political realities. Augustine ruthlessly dissects the piety surrounding Roman patriotism, both its nostalgia for the glorious past and the myths and gods it creates to frame the past as a sign of divine favor.
- › The Romans assumed that their ancestors' behavior was heroic and morally pure, from which they could judge the present and to which they could aspire. On the contrary, Augustine quotes Sallust's belief that it was a mortal fear of Carthage that inspired Romans' focused, ruthlessly self-sacrificial, and collegial behavior, not inherent virtue.

- › Romans also believed in a deeply theological character to their polity. Here Augustine suggests that an honest geopolitical imagination recognizes that nations were great before Rome and that when Rome did rise, the causes were contingent factors that bear no marks of inevitability or destiny.
- › As to divine favor, Augustine believed that the practice of creating a multiplicity of gods led to enormous idolatry and that polytheism benefits only demons, who leverage the Romans' belief into a racket whereby they pretend to offer such favor, but for the price of the Romans' souls.
- The final aspect of Augustine's critique of Roman politics makes three claims—about what motivates political actors to obey, about what motivates political powers to act, and about the addictive nature of the exercise of power.
  - › People and states are motivated by the logic of obedience, not consent. It is not reason but force that coordinates between differing political agents, for obedience is purchased not by consent but by force.
  - › Positive motivations are much less mobilizing of action than negative ones. While we are gathered together in a community by our loves, our behavior is more typically reactive, responding to perceived threats or rivals. We are driven by fear more than aspiration.
  - › The possession of political power changes both vision and behavior: Having begun exercising it, the ability to stop is lost; were you to let it go, someone else would gain it and use it against you. Nor does the exercise of power make you happy: Happiness purchased through worldly power is only and always insecure, and its insecurity drains away your happiness in it. Political power is self-subverting: It becomes its own self-legitimizing end, and, like political desire for freedom, can enslave.

- When we step back from the episodic narrative of Augustine's story and reflect on its overall vision, the systemic nature can be striking. He has a wide and deep vision, deeply aware of how complicated and intricate all the moves have to be. Seen in this light, books 2 through 4 both sketch an overall political philosophy and critique a certain cultural mythology and the elites who embody, promulgate, and profit from it.

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### Questions to Consider

1. Do you think the Romans' pursuit of happiness was ever likely to be successful on Augustine's terms? Was it wise?
  2. Augustine said that kingdoms without justice are little more than large criminal gangs. Do you think he is right? If not, what functionally differentiates states from criminal gangs?
  3. Is insecure happiness really happiness? Augustine thinks it is not. Do you? Does true happiness come only after death?
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# Splendid Vices and Happiness in Hope (Book 5)

## Lecture 8

A pagan Roman might think, following book 4, that Augustine had proved the pagans' suspicion that Christians did not value the world enough to serve it or to fight for it, demonized Rome, and exhibited their basic antipathy toward this world, an attitude incompatible with the morals of citizenship. This was a huge challenge to Augustine, and he confronted it directly in book 5, one of the most historically influential books of *The City of God*. It is about our prospects for excellence in this world, and how best to think about worldly accomplishments.

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### The Problem of Virtue

- In the classical world, humans conceived of human excellence primarily through the language of virtue, a word with a complicated history. The Greek term *arête* has athletic and militaristic connotations. The Latin word *virtus* has etymological roots in “manliness” and in magic. Neither is intimately bound up with ethical gentleness.
- One view of the pursuit of excellence is that our dreams of living our lives the way we want to live—our agency, or power to choose—are always illusory. We are driven by motives we do not command and may not even conceive; and we act into situations so complex that the consequences of our actions are unknowable.
  - In many ways, this idea of what our excellence is and how we should understand ourselves to be pursuing it seems bleak: Humans are equipped with certain energies and capacities,

and we use them to overcome adversity, capitalize on opportunity, and achieve our dreams. Yet we face a profound challenge: Our confidence in our agency is radically and utterly challenged by chance.

- › When we look around the world we see that blessings and curses are distributed apparently at random. The problem of theodicy is not just the problem of unjust evil, but also, as Augustine himself knew, of unjust goodness. The converse is that moral virtue seems randomly distributed, as well.
- › Furthermore, our ability to exercise whatever virtues we do possess depends on situations and conditions where those virtues become relevant. You do not know if you have courage if you are never put in danger. Thus, who we come to be is actually the product of a negotiation between our latent potentialities and the situations in which we find ourselves.
- › We come to know even the seeds of our virtues by being shown them, or awakened to their potentiality in ourselves, by others. If others are so ingredient to our lives, how is who I am so exclusively a matter of what I do?

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## The Problem of Fatalism

- Most Romans thought that some kind of fatalism was the wisest attitude to adopt. Things will happen as they will. We cannot know what will happen, so we must understand our acting on terms quite different from what we typically assume.
- Yet Augustine, despite the rumors that he denies human free will, rejects fatalism; indeed he goes out of his way to systematically reject it. He believes that its crucial error is the metaphysical substructure of our world. Fatalists go wrong in identifying what forces that are not under the will's immediate control oversee the world and how they oversee it. The problem is a failure to



understand the nature of divine sovereignty over creation, especially the nature of divine transcendence.

- For Augustine, Providence is neither chance nor fate, and its course cannot be traced in any worldly pattern. The principle of the world's order is not immanent to the world; its profile cannot be legibly tracked across the events

of history; its integrity and form are real, but fundamentally transcend the chain of events that compose the world.

- First, against astrologers and others who look to the stars: The fates of people cannot be traced in terms of astrology.
- Second, against those who believe in divination and other means of descrying fate: They misconstrue how the world's events will unfold. The only kind of "fate," the only kind of extra-human sovereign control over events, that the Romans could conceive was that the world is determined for all time in its origins, from moment zero. That is not so.
- Providence need not be communicated only through the original moment of creation and then carried in the dumb momentum of matter as it unspools through time and space: as if creation were a line of dominoes, falling down sequentially, but uninfluenced after they start falling.
- There is another way of conceiving God's sovereignty: as vertically empowering every moment of creation immediately. Here God is not the figure who tips over the first domino, but the central point of a bicycle wheel with spokes reaching



*Most Romans thought that some kind of fatalism was the wisest attitude to adopt. Things will happen as they will.*

*We cannot know what will happen, so we must understand our acting on terms quite different from what we typically assume.*



out to each instant of the wheel's perimeter, and creation is splayed out in its temporal sequence across an arc of the wheel's circumference.

- › Thus conceived, this vision of divine sovereignty enables acting principles within the horizontal chain of actions and reactions in the world; indeed, God's action makes these forms of agency real.

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### Foreknowledge versus Free Will

- Nor is foreknowledge an argument against freedom: To know something is going to happen is not the same thing as to compel.
  - › God does not, properly speaking, "foreknow" because God is not in time: no before or after, no anticipation or retrospection exist for God. God knows all things eternally, outside the sequentiality of time. Rather eternity knows every instant of time immediately.
  - › For this reason, "compulsion" improperly describes God's creative immediacy to ourselves. Everything we have, indeed even our wills, is willed into being by God. Yet our agency is not constricted, for our agency is part of what God immediately knows as created.
  - › We contribute nothing to creation outside of God, because there is no "outside" to God's creative energy: We are nothing before, and nothing outside, God's action, and we hold nothing in reserve that God did not in fact create. We are nothing but what God has willed, including our capacity for innovation and surprise.
- Fatalism only has a bite if we believe that we stand downstream from our destiny, and have some pure reserve of our own agency that can accept or reject it. But if we are ourselves part of the flow

of destiny, then we ourselves and our own agential responses are themselves part of destiny.

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## Virtue and Glory

- Once we know that the world is providentially governed, how are we to make sense of Roman virtue? What is the nature of the ancient Romans' morals, and why do they look so impressive? The key here is *gloria*.
  - Romans derived all their virtues from their hunger for *gloria*; it organized their psyches. In fact, it gave them two serially ordered aims, liberty and domination. Because both glory and dominion must be visible to receive approbation, desire for praise from others was part of this hunger.
  - Glory-seeking could function to organize people in virtue-like ways by checking other appetites; as Augustine said, they "suppressed other desires in their boundless desire for this one thing." Thus their pursuit of glory gave them a relative coherence, providing moral qualities derived from deliberate effort.
  - Yet, because "love of praise is a fault," the power and organization that it provides the Romans is not true virtue. But it does discipline the Romans and render them at least provisionally coherent.
- The reward for this kind of pseudo-virtue is also a pseudo-reward. God gives back temporal goods to those intending temporal ends—with the praise of their age, they've received their reward in full.
  - The problem humans face is in the purposes for which they act. Fallen humanity tries to glorify temporal ends. They promote themselves, their causes, their countries. Even among the Christian churches, many seek glory for themselves or their

churches in this way. All are impermanent and ultimately disappointing.

- Humans need to seek a happiness outside of our self-satisfaction. We need to worship. The question is, what will the object of our worship be?
- Roman glory should make Christians feel sad for the Romans, that they have attached their longings to a worldly end. Yet Christians also should pursue glory, to glorify not Rome or themselves but God. So when Christian saints and martyrs did their deeds, they reflected the honor that others directed at them by saying “it was not me, but Christ in me, who did these things.”

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## True Civic Virtue

- While book 5 is about the nature of the relation between good morals and right faith, it is also and the capstone of the first five books, conceived as a primer on Christian civic virtue. Recall that these books were meant to contest civic minded pagans not only about the prospects for happiness in this world, but also about what might motivate right service to the community.

- The pagans’ claim that Christians do not have confidence in the possibility of the world’s durable improvement is right. But they are wrong to think that, therefore, Christians cannot truly care about the world at all.



*Humans need to seek a happiness outside of our self-satisfaction. We need to worship. The question is, what will the object of our worship be?*



- Christians care about it on other grounds altogether. This world, for Christians, cannot be perfected from within. Our efforts must be anchored on some foundation other than

the hope that future generations will be without pain and suffering. The issue must be the right attitude to take to worldly affairs in order to achieve the kind of happiness truly suitable for humans.

- There is another kind of happiness—the happiness that true Christians find in their worldly engagement, and it has the advantage of being the kind of happiness that understands its roots and its end to lie elsewhere. Augustine sketching this happiness in his model of the ideal political actor, the good Christian Emperor Theodosius.
  - In fact, the true happiness of Christian rulers lies not in power, or their own magnificence, or any of the temporal splendors of this life. Worldly happiness evades them as well as the rest of us. They are instead, happy in hope.
  - “We say [Christian rulers] are happy, if they rule justly; if... they are not inflated with pride, but remember that they are but men...if they do all this not for a burning desire for empty glory, but for the love of eternal blessedness; and if they do not fail to offer to their true God, as a sacrifice for their sins, the *oblation* of humility, compassion, and prayer...we call them then *happy in hope*.”

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### Questions to Consider

1. What does Augustine say about the Roman’s desire for glory? How did it serve a useful function for them? What sort of rewards did they receive from it?
  2. For Augustine, do Christians pursue glory? Should they, do you think? What does Augustine say is the true happiness of Christian rulers? Can they be happy in this life? What does their happiness look like? Do they rule for glory?
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# Public Religion in Imperial Rome (Books 6–7)

**I**n turning to books 6 and 7, we confront one of those moments in *The City of God* that may shock us with its feeling of contemporaneity. The idea that religious belief mainly conveys civic benefits that justify its practice is a well-known one. People in Augustine's time thought, as many of us do today, that religion is all right as long as it doesn't get out of hand. It helps keep us stable and decent to one another, and it shores up social mores. It should by no means gain control over our whole way of life; that would lead to an imbalanced fanaticism, which is surely not what we want.

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## The Problem of Pagan Philosophy

- Gibbon's witty remark that Roman religions "were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful" was right about the Romans. They worried that other attachments and loyalties might damage attachment to the civic good.
- The Romans were in no way idiots. They had questions and doubts about their gods, some profound, and they were too smart to allow themselves to be much troubled by religious questions. Religion, they thought, should be obeyed for its civic benefits, regardless of belief in its literal truth. In books 6 and 7 of *The City of God*, Augustine critiques this nest of ideas, quite popular among his pagan contemporaries and even among the Christians of the elite classes.
- The first five books were about basic existential problems of humanity—the inescapable fact of suffering and the inevitability of our fragility. They argued that the pagan gods did not ensure worldly success. In a way they were an extended reflection on the

consequences of the loss of moral innocence, recognition of the problem of evil.

- The second big section of the work is about those elites who seek happiness not in worldly accomplishment, such as the grandeur of Rome, but in the stability of otherworldly tranquility. While the worldviews espoused by these pagan thinkers are more akin to Augustine's Christian message, their similarities render them more dangerous still.
- The problem of pagan philosophy is not the loss of moral innocence, coming to recognize the power of the problem of evil; it is the loss of intellectual innocence and the problem of learning how to think when the simplicity of myth is replaced with the increased complexity, obscurity, and ambiguity of the world.
  - The general mode of this form of inquiry proceeds as follows: We live in a culture swarming with myths, stories meant to orient and motivate us towards appropriate moral and spiritual ends, and yet of diverse and not infrequently dubious moral value.
  - The wise philosopher comes to see that these myths are in some ways psychologically and culturally inescapable—they have already formed our minds by the time we come to critical self-awareness of them.
  - Therefore they must be analyzed for their value and interpreted in such a way as to make them most beneficial; in this way, the myths must be reincorporated into a larger and more healthy picture of the culture's values.
  - Because these inquiries menaced the unquestioning piety of their non-intellectual compatriots, philosophers were wary of sharing their thoughts with the common folk. The basic view of ancient philosophy was that the wise man withdraws from the noise of the world and turns to the peace of quiet retirement in the inner citadel of the soul.

- The civic republicans said Christianity was antiworldly, but the philosophers accused it of being just another superstition, a bad form of wishful, magical thinking. They recoiled at Christianity's vulgarity, its commonness, the way it breached social boundaries. Furthermore, they saw the Christians as all doing rituals, and, what's worse, believing in them. That was superstition, the sin of the ignorant, rude, common folk.

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## From Superstition to True Religion

- *The City of God* is written in the shadow of the philosophical critique of cultural myth, inaugurated by Plato's *Republic*, and Augustine was well aware that the philosophers saw Christianity as just another delusional myth, worse than the others because it lacked the honorable patina of antiquity.
- So Augustine developed a profound Christian reply to the philosophers. It is his analysis of Roman intellectuals' efforts to explain and legitimate some selection of the Roman pantheon while keeping them in their intellectual place.
- Augustine launches his response through his first serious engagement with a serious intellectual rival, Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BC), one of the greatest of Roman minds. Varro's works were almost entirely lost after antiquity, but one in particular was powerfully influential, his *Antiquities, Human and Divine*, an attempt to talk about the deep past of Roman history.
- In the *Antiquities*, Varro offers an analysis of Roman religion that Augustine thinks tries to excuse the religion's obvious absurdities and defend it in light of religion's civic purposes. According to Augustine, Varro's basic claim is that we need to identify the right gods, in the right order, for things to work.
- But, for Augustine, Varro immediately goes on to undercut the project, saying that humans made the gods, and the gods served



the central purpose of ordering and legitimating the customs of human society. According to Varro, the gods are most plausibly long-ago humans whose memory the ceaseless waves of history have worn down into heroes, then legends, then gods.

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*Augustine launches his response  
through his first serious engagement  
with a serious intellectual rival,  
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one of the greatest of Roman minds.*  
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- Yet, despite this skeptical demolition of the Roman pantheon, Varro placidly assumes that the gods should still be revered and worshipped by the populace at large, and that the intellectuals should relate to them with gloriously ambiguous silence. He tries to warrant this viewpoint with two different strategies, neither of which, in Augustine's assessment, works.
- In the primary strategy, Varro distinguishes between three kinds of theology that describe three ways that religion is used in Roman society:
  - First is the "fabulous" theology displayed in the stories of the poets, particularly on the stage, which Varro severely opposed.
  - Second is "natural" theology explained in the work of natural philosophers about the world, with which Varro avoids engaging.
  - Third is "civic" theology deployed by political thinkers and actors to discipline the city, which Varro allows while distinguishing it from the other two.
  - In other words, religion's cultural function serves only to mislead those who take it seriously; but its political function has many valid uses, and its basic metaphysical function as

orienting us rightly to the nature and destiny of the cosmos is more valid still.

- Augustine pounces on Varro's exposition, asking on what basis the three theologies are distinguishable from one another. In fact, he thinks they three bleed into one another:
  - › The lustful gods of the fables warp our political piety and pollute our natural sanctity.
  - › The savagery of civic piety gives us a dangerous taste for domination in all spheres of life.
  - › The hierarchical austerities of natural theology provide pathetic support to the violence and lusts of civic and cultural life and mislead us as to both our real situation and the steps that God is taking to save us.
- As Augustine puts it, "both civil and fabulous theologies are alike fabulous and civil": The city has fallen in love with dangerous myths, self-created, and worked those myths into its self-understanding. But neither of these theologies can grant eternal life or otherwise deliver on their promises.
- In his second strategy, Varro makes a distinction between the "general pantheon" of all the gods that Rome has honored and a group of "select gods."
  - › In other words, Varro can imagine that some selection of the gods should be worshipped in the city, while the rest can be discarded or ignored.
  - › Thus, philosophers can respect the common belief in these gods while not letting on to the crowd that they understand them to be something very different than what the common folk take them to be.

- Here again Augustine pounces. Varro talks about being pious before the mystery and hints at esoteric and probably naturalistic interpretations of the select gods, but none of his sophistry will get us to the true God. Instead it is all an effort to make the city's gods palatable to intellectuals and encourage their sloth.
  - Augustine asks who “selects” the select gods to receive the false honor of being naturalistic forces. Varro and his cronies may think they do, but in fact, they themselves have been seduced by the demons they direct others to obey.
  - Worse yet, these select gods are not what anyone would call natural forces; they are social pathologies such as war and marital rape, camouflaged demons that seem natural only to those trapped inside them. Varro lets them be called gods simply because he is afraid.
  - Varro's cowardice and sloth disgust Augustine, and Varro's blindness to social pathology angers him. But more deeply still there is a kind of futility to Varro's efforts that makes Augustine feel pity for him.
- ● ●
- Augustine's compassion arises from Varro's ultimate failure of imagination, his unexamined assumption of the idea of the god or gods as the soul's universe. Varro is a monotheist, but a kind of pantheistic monotheist, who believes that divinity is the way that this material world is charged with a sort of transcendent mystery.
- ● ●
- Varro talks about being pious before the mystery and hints at esoteric and probably naturalistic interpretations of the select gods, but none of his sophistry will get us to the true God. Instead it is all an effort to make the city's gods palatable to intellectuals and encourage their sloth.*

- In the end Varro fails to offer any sort of account of true religion, in at least three senses.
  - First, he reduces religion to an account about nature but fails to publicize that.
  - Second, he tries to legitimate a selection of the gods without realizing that he is granting theological legitimacy to social pathologies.
  - Third, he fails to get outside the horizon of creation itself, to see the Creator—and so his work is not about real religion at all, but about demons and their various malicious antics to convince others, and themselves, of their superior status. This religion is actually impiety and idolatry.
- And so it turns out that the philosophers' critique of myth, which they tried to apply to the Christians, is turned by Augustine, at least in the case of Varro and his descendants, against themselves: It is they who are superstitious and impious.
- The Christian church offers the true story, teaches about the true God, and practices true sacrifice, and thereby performs true service to that God.

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### Questions to Consider

1. Augustine clearly has little patience with arguments that explain religion in terms of its civic benefits or in terms that do not respect the religion's self-presentation. Yet Augustine's own critique of pagan Roman religion can't be said to respect that religion's self-presentation. So why does he think complaining about Varro's approach is acceptable while taking the same approach himself?

2. What does Augustine think of the Roman philosophers' proposal that some selection of the gods worshipped in the city (the "principal" gods, Augustine calls them) are actual gods, while the rest can be discarded or ignored? What, in particular, does Augustine think of the idea that a variety of deities exists? (Cf. book 7, chapter 30)
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# Who or What Is God? (Books 8–9)

**H**appiness is a culturally concrete word whereby we try to signify, imperfectly, a human universal. We all want to be happy. The idea is not that all humans through history would self-consciously recognize this desire as their aspiration, but we would at least find that description of our lives intelligible. It certainly was true in Augustine's world. If he had wanted this to be a book simply about worldly success, he could have stopped at book 5. But he goes on because there is another kind of happiness—philosophical happiness.

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## Big Questions

- When Augustine engages religious and philosophical thinkers, the non-material and theological dimensions of the debate about happiness come into their own.
  - In books 6 and 7, Augustine exposes the religion of Rome as instrumentalist, transactional, and idolatrous, and the Roman intellectuals who might have helped as confused about the divine and cowardly before the populace.
  - In books 8 and 9, Augustine begins to engage those he feels are most thoughtful among the pagans on this issue, the Platonists, for whom happiness is found only in the transcendent realm of the unchanging stabilities upon which our world of flux abides. But he also thinks they are deeply flawed in misunderstanding who that one true God truly is and how we can access such a God.
- Augustine debates big questions:
  - Who is God and what does it mean to call God Creator?

- › How is God related to us?
- › What mediates between God and us?
- › What makes us and God able to relate?
- › How exactly can God be said to care about Creation in general and our worldly and material existence in particular?

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## Platonic View of God

- The Platonists were the most astute philosophers because they focused on morality and purification and affirmed that happiness is the fusion of practical and contemplative aims.
  - › They apprehended what other philosophers failed to apprehend: the distinction between Creator and created, immutable and mutable, and that humans can have some intuition of this distinction.
  - › They dimly perceived that divine transcendence means that any literal language of distance cannot properly capture God's transcendence, thus enabling God's transcendence to be equally present to and distant from all creation.
- They also realized that human happiness consists in the eternal enjoyment of this transcendent God. For them, happiness was found by purifying attachments and values so that the inner, immaterial, rational, and transcendent self could rise to reunion with the One, its source.
  - › This union could be accomplished by imitating the disinterested, passionless nature of the gods as far as humans can, thereby becoming like the divine and ascending ever higher, culminating finally in a union of indistinguishability with the One.

## The Augustinian View of God

- Here Augustine begins to criticize the Platonists. For they err tragically in assuming this God needs mediators to relate to this world, that God is fundamentally elsewhere, and not immediately and intimately concerned with the world. That conviction—of the need for mediators—leads the Platonists to worship demons.
  - For the Platonists, demons do not encourage their devotees to engage in theatricals, but in sacrificial rituals. Their demons wander among different levels of metaphysical reality, undertaking commerce between the transient realm of materiality and the transcendent realm of spirit.
  - The immediate and functional problem with the Platonists' understanding of demons is that they are like us in that they share our maladies, but they are like gods in that they can never change. The demons suffer impermanent passions, which makes them incapable of mediating between us and the gods to secure our permanent happiness.
- But the real problem with the Platonists is that they are attracted by the idea of demons, because they assume God needs mediation, and they make that assumption because they think God is fundamentally uninterested in the world.
  - The Platonists cannot imagine a God so loving of the world as to remain intimately and immediately engaged with it. They cannot conceive that God might not be averse to being directly touched, that God might want to reach us. They cannot imagine that God has

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real unsponsored and unprompted and really unwarranted love for humanity.

- › This view entails a deeply negative vision of material reality. The vision of God as supremely immaterial and materiality as nothing but dead matter may exist as two sides of the same coin. Platonists affirm both.

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### The Platonic Path to God

- The Platonists' vision of God as fundamentally repulsed by material reality imposes a basically escapist strategy for getting to God, which in turn implies to them the anthropological claim that we are not naturally worldly, but are exiles in materiality.
- Neoplatonism imagines our journey to God as a flight from the world because like could only be known by like, and so we and God can only come together in our mutual essential difference from materiality.
- The Platonists realized that there was a truly transcendent Creator whose transcendence put all creation equally indeterminately distant from itself, but they underestimated the love of God and the lovability of creation.
- The ancient world, in heaven as on earth, was all about associations. The Greeks and Romans were great believers in connections, in whom you knew, on what networks you were a part of. From this worldview, a basic ethics emerged: Help your friends and harm your enemies. Thus these networks organized your whole life, and potential pagan converts were deeply worried about what would happen to their network access when they converted.

- In the ancient world, different classes of people did not mix; their vision of transcendence was therefore trapped in their snobbishness.
  - They assumed an image of God as a Roman nobleman who would never sully himself by descending to the distasteful lower classes.
  - They saw the transcendence of God from creation, but they imagined that transcendence as akin to the *hauteur* of ancient nobility toward the plebeians, not the passion of the loving father who would do anything for his child.
  - They could not conceive that a transcendent Creator might take any kind of interest, let alone an immediate and lively concern, for such lowly creatures as humanity.
- In the end, the Platonists' social prejudices forced them to surrender their deepest insight. Their initial metaphysical insight about God's radical transcendence of creation was vexed by their fear of God's pollution by matter.

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## The Augustinian Path to God

- The Platonists' fear of contaminating God, their fixation on a mistaken conception of divine purity, and their imposition of multiple layers of mediation all work to corrode their conception of divine transcendence, to encourage them to mistake distance and distaste for holiness.
- For Augustine, God's holiness and transcendence are not matters of the divine being afraid of contamination by the material world. In fact, God loves us and has come to us, in the history of revelation as seen through the history of the people Israel and then in the person of Jesus Christ.

- For Augustine, there is no place in all of Creation where God is not accessible to us. The idea of God as outside space and time misleads the Platonists, he says, because all is inside God. This misconception warped the Platonists' strategy of how to get to God because, for them, only their minds would be saved. They could not fundamentally imagine that the material world could be valued by a truly transcendent God.
- They see that God is transcendent, that the contingencies of this world cannot be the ultimate framework of the universe, that creation needs a Creator, but they do not see the road to union with God. They do not see that God has already traversed that road and has come to us.
- To respond to this visitation, our first task is to humble ourselves to receive this grace. Augustine understood that what we should flee was not our material bodies, but improper investment in our bodies.
  - This notion came from thinking through the meaning of the Incarnation, of God becoming human and fully taking on human flesh. To arrive at that insight, he had to humble his mind to the discipline of the scriptures, which the Platonists refused to do.
  - Thus, the Platonists practiced a religion centered union with God, but what that might be they never said. They do believe that part of what we must shed in seeking union with God is our emotions. These they think are essentially worldly. Surely feelings like fear, or love, have are

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physical in nature, and thus cannot be part of the deepest truth of the universe. They didn't know much about God, but they were certain that God could not feel anything.

- The Platonists were not wholly wrong about our need of help in realizing God's loving presence in this world. Instead, against Platonic pride, we need a mediator who is Christ, the true presence of God in our midst. Eternal and stable like God, but temporal and material like ourselves, Christ is the mediator that the demons can never be.

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## Union with God

- But this Christ is no mediator; Christ bypasses the whole idea of mediation entirely, Christ just is God. In this, Augustine violates a basic principle of the ancient metaphysical imagination: that like can only be known by like. For him, the Incarnation shows no fundamental divide exists between layers of reality. All is more joined together than set apart.
- Nor were the Platonists wrong that purification was required to join with this God. But the purification required, the sacrifice, is undertaken by Christ as humanity's great high priest, and the purification is given to us by God in our walk through our lives. And for either of these to work you must accept Christ. Thus the first act of true philosophy is loving God and submitting humbly to God's presence.
- Augustine's point about the dangers of imagining God's transcendence in terms of distance may be of some interest existentially even today. For there may be analogous social forces shaping our imaginations in ways that make it harder for us to see God. When we see the world, we see only blank walls, cleverly camouflaged as faces or trees or buildings or books, upon which we project our self-fashioned hypotheses.

- Augustine thinks all of this is a lie. In truth we are present to one another and to the world. And the truth that guarantees this truth—our presence—the truth that is present before all the other presences is God. We are thoroughly secondary. Perhaps Augustine's vision of how transcendence can secure presence, not forbid it, may be of use today.

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### Questions to Consider

1. Can you be genuinely happy if you are mortal (chapters 14–16)? Who or what, for Augustine, secures the happiness of the just people of the world?
  2. For the Platonists, how is God concerned with Creation, and how not? Can the Platonic demiurge be compared to Christ as the Son of God in the Trinity? How do the two visions have similar functions, and how do they differ?
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# Sacrifice and Ritual

## (Book 10)

Once we have realized that God is marked not only by absolute transcendence but also by an equally absolute selfless love, we can go on to ask the next question: If God loves us as much as this, then what are we to do in return? Clearly there can be no payback for God's love: It is unilateral and immeasurable. It produces in us an infinite obligation, to be sure, but what sort of obligation? And how can an infinite obligation be met?

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### The Need for Theurgy

- Book 10 contains Augustine's crucial discussion of the rival understandings of how humanity properly responds to God's reaching out to Creation. If the Platonists are wrong, how do we thankfully repay God? To whom is piety due? How do we demonstrate that piety?
- The answer is about the nature of worship and sacrifice, as pagans and Christians understand these terms. For Augustine the issue is a matter of the distinct nature of the Christian community, the church, that is called into being by Jesus Christ. True piety is inseparable from ethics, mercy and compassion, and doing works of mercy as participation in God's plan.
  - › The focus on ethics was relatively unusual in the Roman world. Ancient religion was frankly transactional. You get things from the gods in return for giving things to the gods. Augustine says that religion is not the best word to describe this exchange, because it refers to actions not confined to God—one can treat one's ancestors or one's city with religious devotion, for example.

- The word Augustine thinks best is the Greek word *latreia*, meaning service and worship. The main connotation is effort over time, generally organized communally, directed at supernatural ends—a gift to God or the gods. In short, whom do we serve, whose glory do we work for?
- For Platonists, our service of the gods is embodied in theurgy, effective use of such devices as rituals and strategies of appeal and inducement to get what you want from immaterial beings. And the need for theurgy turns on the Platonists' belief that we need some mediator to get access to God. For Augustine, these mediators are the demons.
  - Basically the demons they invoke and serve, in the mistaken hopes that those demons will serve them, are wrongly aligned genuinely to give the philosophers access to the divine. Augustine frames this very pointedly: The demons have knowledge but no compassion.
  - To Augustine, the demons have knowledge, but it is the useless knowledge that inflates the ego without illuminating the mind; it is "knowledge without love."
- It is indeed a certain description of Hell, to know and yet be unmoved by that knowledge. The problem for the demons is not just that they've been there; it's that they live there. They know their rebellion is futile, but they cannot admit that knowledge in a way that would enable them to change, to return to God.
- In contrast to the demons, Christ is a perfect mediator between human and divine: the one and perfect sacrifice, the Christians' great high priest and inaugurator of Christian liturgy, teacher of worship, and great exemplar of proper action in this world.

## Christ as Mediator

- The real mediator is God in Christ. Christ comes to us and becomes human without losing his divinity. And Christ is moved for us, but not fundamentally by us. Christ chooses to see and Christ chooses to love, for the entire triune God has chosen to see and love. Christ can mediate properly, because Christ is both true human (created flesh) and true God (eternally unchanging).
- The invisible God makes God's engagement with humans visible in a way they can bear—in the Law and the story of Israel and then in the person of Jesus the Messiah, the Christ.
  - Christ's very presence puts us in touch with the triune God in God's very being.
  - Christ's deeds are ways of having our attention directed toward the divine: In contrast to theurgy, the miracles wrought by Christ always refer to higher things; they always lift us up to contemplate and love the true God.
- The mediation of Christ is a matter of sacrifice, to be sure; but it is not fundamentally our sacrifice. The real sacrifice is Christ's death on the Cross, which Christ himself enacts.
  - Christ is the wholly innocent victim and thus the perfect sacrifice for our wrongs done to God—the most valuable offering humanity can make, untainted by the crime being propitiated: this is the old reading of the atonement, and of the sacrifice as reparation.
  - Christ voluntarily and finally repays all the debts incurred in our rebellion against God. The sufferings we suffer because of our membership in the line of Adam and Eve are no more.
- In this transaction Christ is both true sacrificer and true and truly sacrificed, the great high priest and the sacrificed Lamb of God. In this way, Jesus is the true high priest and only theurgist.





God wants us to do likewise—and so for Augustine, the human response to God's loving acts, construed as sacrifice, only makes sense in light of this one true sacrifice of Christ.

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## Christian Sacrifice

- The key feature of all true sacrifices for humans is a change of heart—an act of inner contrition that gives all glory to God and turns to our neighbors with mercy in our hearts.
  - Yet these outward sacrifices cannot be confused with the true sacrifice. That was Christ's doing, and it was fundamentally an act of compassion—of feeling one with humanity.
  - The church participates in the work of Christ by becoming the compassion of Christ, by repeating its memorials of Christ's sacrifice in the Eucharist and in acts of compassion and mercy in the world.
- This vision of compassion, *misericordia*, is unlike anything the pagan philosophers offer.
  - For the Stoics, one can have a certain kind of pity for the world, but only insofar as one does not identify with that world and does not allow oneself to be moved by that world. But that is just what Christ did: Christ did indeed feel true compassion and was moved by the world's suffering.
  - The problem with the Stoics is that they do not want us to be so vulnerable to the world. They imagine a region of radical privacy, an invulnerable citadel of the rational will which can always be locked from the inside.
  - For Augustine, this is misconceived in both directions. The world is always in us, and we in the world, and besides, so is sin, so the putative enemy is always already inside the gates.

- There is no way not to partake of this world's passions unless we seek to flee our humanity altogether. Happily, God is always more inside us than we are, so our choices are to deny the kind of creatures we are and the kind of creation in which we exist, or to accept them and make of our souls and bodies, a living sacrifice to God, as Christ has shown us how to do.
- In this way, our full sacrifice is threefold, and in three directions, up, in, and out:
  - It is a sacrifice of our excessive care for this world, which releases us from bondage to it and allows us to ascend to God.
  - It is the sacrifice of inward contrition, of regret for our own excessive self-love, which releases us from undue self-regard.
  - It is the sacrifice of that undue self-regard that allows us to use ourselves to go out to the neighbor in compassion.

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## The Purification of Happiness

- Not all mercy is properly oriented, and so not all mercy is sacrifice. The issue is the end to which you dedicated the sacrifice of your deeds. This proper directedness does not lead immediately to proper joy, but it does lead there eventually. It is the way that we imitate Christ and thus become like him. Hence the climax of right service to God, which is compassion, is the purification of happiness.
- The Platonists recognize that such purification is



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necessary, but they fail to see that it has been accomplished by Christ because they cannot imagine that a human being could actually convey the presence of God to us. If the Platonists had understood, they would have seen the world as sacramental, as a mystery, meaning more than its bare literality.

- The key sacrament—the one on which the whole sacramentality of creation relies—is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But that sacramental action on the part of God means that all creation in its diverse ways speaks of that mystery, if we only have eyes to see it. The key here is that the world is not to be disdained or anxiously manipulated, but instead gratefully admired and delighted in as a sign of God's love for humanity.
- We can see this only when we understand that the question we must ask is, not how do we sacrifice to get to God, but how do we become the sacrifice that God is working within us to be and to do? For us to see the sacramentality of the world, we must accept that we ourselves are being used by God.
- At the end of book 10, then, Christianity has emerged as the best source for religion and philosophy. There is a parallel here between the understanding of political happiness that ends book 5 ("happy in hope") and the discussion in this book about how true philosophy and religion lead to our ultimate blessedness.

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### Questions to Consider

1. Augustine finds important common ground for disputing the main opponents in book 10, chapter 1: "the Platonists." He finally rejects the Platonists as failing to realize something important about God: that we don't need to "get to God," because God has come to us.

2. How is it, in book 10, that we show God the service that is God's due? What is the right form of sacrifice that we should make? What does Augustine think of the sacrifices that the Platonists make?
  3. What do you think of Augustine's accusation that the Platonists' apparent tolerance of rival religions is fundamentally a matter of cowardice?
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# Augustine's Critique of Rome (Books 1–10)

**T**he first 10 books of *The City of God* give us a glimpse into the wide range of views and attitudes that were available in Augustine's world—a range of views that bears some interesting similarities with those available in our own. From visions of the greatness of nations and the hypocrisies of power politics, to the perhaps cynical intellectualism of Varro and the profound (if tragically misguided) spiritual questing of the Neoplatonists, we find again and again echoes in antiquity of currents coursing through the spiritual longings of our own age.

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## Historical Importance

- While definitely partisan and polemical, these 10 books remain invaluable to all of us—whatever our religious beliefs—as the longest complete contemporary depiction of pagan Greco-Roman culture that has survived to today. We have no larger reflection on the pursuits of happiness that pagan Rome employed, and what Augustine sees as its tragic pathos.
- The first 10 books must be seen as Augustine's most considered judgment of the pagan culture in which the Christian churches of his day found themselves and as the most elaborate apologetic argument, negative and positive, that Christianity had yet produced.
- Two parallels with other books come to mind here.
  - First is a subtle parallel with the *Aeneid*, in which a man leaves behind his burning wreck of a home, carrying his ancestry on his back, and travels through several different false homes before he reaches his true new home.

- › In books 1–10, Augustine shows us the pagans' attempts to find a safe harbor via various bad ways of seeking happiness, before reaching the true home. Each way must be traveled, though we find out why only at the conclusion in book 10: In the journeying, the traveler learns in a way he could never learn by simply being told.
- › The second parallel is Augustine's own *Confessions*, which similarly structures conversion as a wandering amid the possibilities of pagan life, dismantling their promise, and ending with a turn to the Christian story.

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### Structure of the Argument—Negative Apologetics

- Now, we should say something about the structure of the overall argument of these first 10 books. It is fair, if a bit shallow, to call these books an apology; that is, a defense. In Augustine's own time, a genre of apologetic writings existed in Christianity.
  - › Typically these consisted of what are called negative apologetics, wherein a writer takes up a series of challenges to Christian belief, and shows them to lack the power that their proponents think they have.
  - › We also sometimes see positive apologetics, an argument that attempts to provide its audience with some fresh positive reasons for belief, intended to convince others who are not yet convinced of the truth of the Christian faith.
- For right now, let's focus on the negative apologetics. It is a fundamentally defensive project. In fact, one of the problems of this sort of negative apologetic is that it is so defensive as to be at times tempted toward simply rejecting the proposals put to them by others on those others' own terms. This argument grants the legitimacy of the terms on which the debate is based.

- This approach is problematic, and Augustine clearly is at times intentionally avoiding this approach, even as he does take on a series of accusations against Christianity and attempt to show they are wrong-headed.
- The negative charges Augustine especially addresses are fundamentally two:
  - First, Christianity is bad for Rome, for it damages care for the city. It is, in short, unpatriotic. Here he is arguing against opponents we can call patriots.
  - Second, Christianity is a false philosophy, because it misaligns humans to the world. It is superstitious and impious. Here he is arguing against opponents we can call the philosophers.
  - Behind both is the basic claim that Christianity cannot provide the kind of happiness that we as humans always seek, because Christianity does not properly orient humans to the world. It is escapist, a way of avoiding the world.
- The most profound form of the patriotism challenge Augustine must address is that of civic thinkers who believe that concrete historical action in the world can do real and permanent good.
  - Rome understood itself as the vessel for values that transcended itself. Part of the psychological shell-game it could play on its adherents was to suggest



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that its aims were never just its own parochial aims, but the aims of civilization itself.

- The belief was something like this: Whatever the brutality that it may from time to time display, Rome is a liberally minded empire bringing a more humane way of life composed of civilizing customs, a cosmopolitan way of life, and vast transcontinental trade to make the world a more fit place for human habitation.
- As to Christianity's reputed incompatibility with philosophy, Augustine argued that if philosophy is truly the serious pursuit of genuine wisdom and happiness, it is the truest philosophy and broadly available to any who will humbly submit themselves to live in the schools of charity that are the Christian churches. In other words, the truest philosophers are the Christians.
  - First he argues that Christians can make sense of suffering, at least in some way, while Romans cannot do so.
  - Then he argues that the true nature of Roman history suggests that Rome before Christianity was no better than Rome with Christianity—and in a number of ways, it was quite unarguably worse.
  - Finally, rejecting the received account of why pagan Rome was able to achieve so much, which argued that Rome's rise was due to the true virtue of the great Roman heroes and the virtuous populace from which they sprung, he offers an account that differs dramatically, arguing that their success was due more to splendid vices than to any actual greatness of soul.
- In general, books 1–5 can be understood as our response to a loss of moral innocence. The answer comes in book 5, with the discussion of the kind of happiness that a Christian emperor can expect—not happiness as the pagans understood it, but

something quite different and deferred until after this transient mortal life.

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## Structure of the Argument—Positive Apologetics

- Augustine takes up the second challenge—that Christianity is a bad philosophy—in books 6–10. Just as the first five are a response to the loss of moral innocence, these next books are a response to a loss of intellectual innocence once we saw that our childhood confidence in the surface meanings of our fables and legends was misplaced.
  - What do we do now?
  - What should our relationship now be to the basic framework of existence?
- Augustine explores the official religion of Rome, which cannot be practiced in a coherent way that would secure its adherents a reasonable prospect of otherworldly happiness. Then he explores what he takes to be the most powerful personal philosophy available to Roman elites in his day, Platonism, and argues that despite its many insights, it doesn't work either:
  - First, the demons it relies on cannot be proper mediators, and the whole idea of mediation that the reliance on them assumes is deeply misconstrued.
  - Second, true mediation must come from a divine reality, like Christ, who also teaches us thereby to live rightly in the world, which also means to have the proper affections and emotional comportment.
  - Third, all this discussion amounts to a different account of how one gets to God, or rather how God gets to us, through the careful reconsideration of what the true sacrifice turns out to be.

- The discussion of books 6–10 climaxes in a specific positive claim: that Christianity is the true philosophy and Christ the ultimate philosopher, and that Christians' participation in the community in imitation of the sacrifice of Christ embodies what we ought to do as regards our otherworldly duties.
- Augustine takes up the pagan accusations, investigates them, reconfigures their terms, and shows how the Christians are actually doing what the pagans accuse them of *not* doing, and doing so in a better way than the pagans do. More broadly, he is really arguing against pagan Rome and its pursuits of happiness, and we may see that their concerns are not entirely alien to us today.
- Although Augustine does not show exactly how the longings of the pagans, as they themselves understand them, will find satisfaction in the Christian church, he does suggest that:
  - If the pagans will work with him on better understanding their own longings, they may well find out that they have misunderstood them in the past.
  - His account offers a powerful and more truthful reinterpretation of them.
  - They revealed to be vividly connected to Christian practices.
- Augustine neither exactly undertakes nor rejects the task of positive apologetics; instead he shows how a therapeutic take on the pagans' desires may help them understand themselves better.

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*Augustine explores the official religion of Rome, which cannot be practiced in a coherent way that would secure its adherents a reasonable prospect of otherworldly happiness.*

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## The Semantics of Sociocultural Criticism

- Much of Augustine's argument with the pagans can be understood as a series of semantic debates, and Augustine's project is helpfully depicted by conceiving of it as undertaking the task of building a new language from old words.
  - The words of the Romans—republic, city, empire, providence, justice, virtue, liberty, glory, love, passion, sacrifice, charity, and mercy—are words Augustine retains. But by book 10, he is using them in a very different way than his Roman ancestors or pagan contemporaries.
- What Augustine does with these Roman terms foreshadows how he understands the relationship between the body of Christ and the Jews—continuity amid transformation.
- Augustine seems to be the first thinker to offer something like a fundamental critique of the whole sociocultural system that is Rome and the first to see society as a whole as an object of full analytic interest. This kind of critique is a major change in critical thinking. It offers, we may say, a more radical kind of social analysis and social critique than heretofore had been practiced.
- This way to imagine the problem of historical change is very modern. Augustine is the first modern thinker—the first for whom the classical world is not simply an unquestionable context, but a complicated legacy of inheritance, the first person to ask how to reconnect with an inheritance that is no longer unproblematically our own.
- Now we are about to enter what seems a very different work indeed, one with such differences in style and rhetoric as to make one wonder how the two parts fit together in a single unified whole.

### Questions to Consider

1. Why, for Augustine, are the Romans the way they are? What does Augustine think pagan souls are being shaped for?
  2. How do you think that Augustine shows that the intellectual elites of books 6–10 exhibit the *libido dominandi* he describes as governing the political elites of books 1–5?
  3. I said that Augustine would find our practice of religious studies worth comment. Based on books 1–10, what would those comments be?
  4. Society can be understood as a performance, or a spectacle. What is the earthly city performing?
  5. Why are the first ten books ordered as they are, with the local history of Rome in books 1–5, and then the universalities of philosophy in books 6–10?
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# Metaphysics of Creation and Evil (Book 11)

Complaining is easy in theology and philosophy; offering a constructive alternative is not. The topics and tenor of the discussion change dramatically in book 11, suggesting how Augustine conceives the theological project he is undertaking and how it serves his first theological task—explicating the meaning of God’s existence as Creator. Augustine offers this alternative via a systematic exposition that assumes that the Christian faith can offer a coherent way of seeing the entire world, not just discrete parts, and that this way of seeing is not an esoteric doctrine taught only to a narrow elite but intelligible to all.

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## A Second Beginning for *The City of God*

- A distinctive moral psychology is implied in Augustine’s conviction: He believes that one’s actions are contingent upon one’s understanding, that right vision is the wellspring of good conduct. That is the ambition of a properly systematic approach: It proposes a whole new way of looking at the world. Augustine’s is a public exposition, welcoming whoever tries to read it, and it is organized around a biblical historical narrative.
- Augustine’s choice of biblical narrative as the crucial medium of his exposition has important implications.
  - › It prioritizes the worldview and categories of the Bible. Augustine knows language’s capacity to shape thought and is alert to the tension between biblical and philosophical categories.
  - › It prioritizes the genre of historical writing over philosophical treatise.

- Augustine can restart *The City of God* halfway through because God has already, in the People Israel and in Christ, offered a new beginning in reality.
- The main point of book 11's exposition is the original beginning, what we can know about God as Creator and the nature of Creation. Learning this new story will help us begin to see the world correctly and to live in it as we ought.
- The first thing to learn is what it means that we are creatures and that God is Creator. The Platonists failed to see how a perfect God can create our manifestly imperfect world.
  - They continually slip back into a reactionary and dualistic nostalgia for an imagined life of disembodied existence.
  - To do better we need to understand how the world can both be the creation of a loving God and yet have fallen into its present condition.

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## A Scriptural Textbook

- Part II begins there, telling the Christian narrative of the Creation, the Fall, redemption and consummation. Augustine explores the Christian doctrine of Creation:
  - That it shows God as wholly stable, singular, and simple.
  - That all creation depends on God and is thus contingent and from nothing.
  - That because God's will is essentially good, all creation is good as well.
  - That even if evil is in the world, it is secondary to and parasitic upon creation's more basic goodness.

- For Augustine, this narrative is a lesson in what it means to call our reality and ourselves God's creation—the immediate and wholly good consequences of a transcendent God's exhaustively fulfilled, wholly spontaneous will.
- Augustine's purpose is to explain the church's mission as a distinct community, the Christian scriptures as a discrete body of insight about the world, and Christian commitment to believing scriptural testimony as an indispensable component of how right vision of Creation can be cultivated.
- We are learning here about the world outside the church, yet through the church as scriptural learning lovingly overseen and guided by the Holy Spirit. This learning has several components:
  - God's plan is revealed in Christ, the vehicle for understanding God and Creation.
  - Christ is revealed to us in scripture: The Old Testament gives us the basic vocabulary and context; the New Testament tells us the story of Jesus's life, teaching, death, and resurrection and of the first generation of the church.
  - Scripture is properly readable only within the loving discipline of the community of belief and practice Jesus created, and to which he taught the right habits of inquiry and principles of understanding.
- Circularity is inherent in this learning, as believers move between their efforts as a community to understand the scripture stories and use them to guide their lives as service to God through service to others; in turn, that

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*This vision of God's transcendence,  
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meaning that Creation relies on  
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life together informs, focuses, and elucidates their reading of scripture.

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## Understanding God as Creator

- In book 11, we learn what it means to say that God is Creator, that God is simple and unchanging and that this simple and unchanging God creates the dimensionalities of space and time in which our created world unfolds.
- To the question of how an immutable God creates a mutable world, Augustine answers that the problem arises only if creation is conceived as an act accomplished in time, rather than an act that creates time itself.
- If time, conceived as a temporally sequenced manifold of phases, is itself created, then God's reality as Creator can be conceived of as an eternal attribute of God—in God's absolute and unchanging essence—outside of time.
- This vision of God's transcendence, implies that Creation is contingent, meaning that Creation relies on God for its very being. Augustine insists on the true transcendence of God and the true contingency of the world. God does not share any of the conditions that delimit Creation. God is unchanging, eternal, and simple, which in this context means utterly singular and unified; without ambivalence or partiality.
- Creation's temporality means that we are never wholly ourselves—part of us is always in the past and in the future, so that we experience ourselves as fragmented. Therefore, the meaning of history is carried in and by its contingency, and every event is a revelation of part of the true essence of history

## The Problem of Evil

- If Creation is effortlessly brought into being by a wholly good and omnipotent Creator, then what about the presence of evil? Augustine offers two answers, meant to make the presence of evil barely tolerable.
- Evil amplifies the beauty and glory of Creation; the beauty of the universe is magnified by contraries. All evil is a counterpoint to good, setting off the glory of the Lord. Much of what we judge to be noble is recognizable because it struggles against evil. So perhaps evil is necessary for us to see the good and for its true goodness to be revealed. This aesthetic defense poses two problems.
  - It seems reasonable to say that God would never create wickedness unless God could put the wickedness to good use. Yet doesn't this idea involve God in directly using evil?
  - Aesthetic counterpointing seems to suggest a latent dualism in Augustine's thinking about good and evil. Is there some essential character to evil that lets it oppose goodness?
- These worries trouble Augustine. Perhaps the charge annoyed him so much because it ignored the second way he argued about evil, which is not an aesthetic argument but an ontological one—not about the place of evil in the beauty and drama of the world, but about the reality of evil in the world itself.
- Augustine was a vigorous non-dualist. Evil is most basically a privation of being and goodness, not a positive force in itself. God is Creator, Creation is contingent upon God, evil exists as an aesthetic ornament and as ontological privation, but no more.

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## The Stages of Creation

- Now Augustine turns to the scriptural account of Creation and begins to disabuse believers of misunderstandings to which they are susceptible. Most pointedly, he suggests that they do

not understand what God is doing in the six days of Creation.

- For Augustine, creation is temporal, but not in any literal fashion. But just as today, there were literalists in Augustine's age who read the six days as truly six 24-hour periods, kept by some sort of eternal clock. Their pride led them to a refusal to imagine that God can surprise. But what has God done so far, Augustine asks, that has not surprised?
- Augustine proposes an allegorical account of the text as the stages of Creation, which is also an account of the stages of creatures' coming to know, as best we can, its true nature.
- Each day has its meaning in knowing something of the different principles that create the cosmos. More basic still are two ways of knowing, repeated in each day—morning and evening. We can distinguish these as two modes of intelligent created existence; Augustine calls them morning knowledge and evening knowledge.
  - Evening knowledge is what we have today: knowledge of creatures in themselves. It is murky, growing more so as night comes on. It is real knowledge but hazy and indistinct.
  - Morning knowledge is the knowledge of creatures in their beginnings in and from God. We come to know creatures as God has created them and through God's knowing of them. This knowledge, though it may seem like it should dull as the day goes on, will last all eternity.



*Aesthetic counterpointing seems to suggest a latent dualism in Augustine's thinking about good and evil. Is there some essential character to evil that lets it oppose goodness?*



- Despite our distance from the consummation of creation in the last days, it is still possible to be blessed now, to live a sanctified life: Some morning knowledge can today be ours. We can participate in blessedness now, in several ways.
  - First, we are potentially better off than Adam was before the fall. Adam's immediate happiness was much happier than anyone's today can be, but he did not yet have the promise of eschatological consummation given us in the People Israel and Christ. In this way, the redeemed and blessed today are much happier, though theirs is an anticipatory happiness.
  - Second, even in our present we have intimations of the joy to come. Book 11 climaxes in a vision of how what we can affirm about the ultimate endpoint of God's creation teaches us something about the nature of God. Informed by the story of Creation and the promises of God as contained in scripture, we can participate in God now, seeing God's work in the world and ourselves.
- We can come to know God through reflecting on ourselves, on our loves. In loving, we see three different kinds of love: a love of existence, of the bare thing that we love; a love of knowledge of the loved and of learning more about it; and a love of love: the delight we take in the fact of our loving.
- Terror, fear, even anxiety may exist in love, but none totally effaces its core meaning, which is recognition that we can love another and value the beloved in a way that does not reduce to merely self-interest or merely a projection of ourselves.
- By recognizing that we partake in this love, we can recognize we partake in the basic dynamic of love and are coming to know God. For God is love.

### Questions to Consider

1. What does Augustine say is the topic of the second half of *The City of God*? How does that topic appear relevant to what he discusses in book 11?
  2. In book 11, Augustine spends a great deal of time discussing the importance of Christ and of faith in Christ as crucial for human salvation. Thus Christianity is the one true religion. Why is Christianity so important to Augustine? Why does he conceive of salvation as coming only through Christianity?
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# Fall of the Rebel Angels (Book 12)

**I**f book 11 explores the most basic fact about our world, the fact that it was created and has a beginning, book 12 addresses the next issue: If there are right beginnings, there are also wrong ones; most fundamentally the “wrong beginning” of creatures who decide inexplicably to rebel against God’s plan for them in Creation—that is, the wrong beginning of the Fall and evil. Here is the core of Augustine’s analysis of the problem as an account of the origins of sin and the nature of evil in any creature with a will of its own.

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## The Nature of Evil

- We study the language of evil because, despite the many legitimate worries about it, it may articulate an ineradicable element of the experience of humanity as a whole. Whatever you think of arguments about evil in general, for many people today Augustine’s account seems both experientially and conceptually implausible.
  - It seems experientially implausible because the world doesn’t seem to be simply good. Without the revelation of the Bible, the idea that nature itself bears some generative power for evil is actually empirically powerful and hard to defeat.
  - It seems conceptually incoherent, because it seems too rigorously tilted toward the basic goodness of Creation and may seem to offer too little in the way of a purchase for evil.
- Augustine’s account of Creation as in itself wholly good leads ineluctably to a powerful question: How is evil even possible?

- He unpacks his answer through a discussion of the angelic fall because the fall of the angels is a way to study the origin of evil in almost laboratory conditions. Angelic agency is not immured in the muck of the material world; the less our view is clouded by the dirt of materiality in which the roots of our agency are anchored, the more clearly we see its roots.
- According to Augustine, evil is embedded within a framework of goodness. The existence of evil is intelligible only within God's larger framework of Creation: To have being is the singular characteristic of goodness. Therefore, when we say something is evil, we mean ultimately that the thing tends toward non-being, which is contrary to God.
- The good angels accepted God's gift of creating them in gratitude, while the bad angels resented the conditions of the gift, and thereby resented their being itself. Thus the demons are, for Augustine, fundamentally fallen angels and therefore good.
- Evil is a vacuity where something should be. The evil will is opposed to both God and its own nature, and we can only properly talk about a nature being evil as a way of its testifying to the good form that it should have retained. We recognize evil only by contrast to good, and by recognizing fault as fault, we necessarily praise what the nature as created was meant to be.
- Evil is also inescapably secondary because it is a failed nothing. Its nihilism always carries with it the pathos of a nothing that should have been a something or a somebody. The secondariness of evil is also ironic, because its whole self-understanding as rebellion is meant to express a longing for autonomy, for separation from God, and that is the one thing it can never achieve.
- Augustine is saying that for things to be less good than they ought to be, they must be able to vary in the degree to which they fulfill their cosmic destinies. This is a far cry from saying that

creation is necessarily sinful. In this account, sin is the failure of creation to live up to the ideals that God has set for it.

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## Agency and Causality

- Saint John's statement that "the devil did not stand fast in the truth" means, for Augustine, that wickedness is not natural. He says, "The choice of evil is an impressive proof that the nature is good," because the chooser must choose evil as an act of rebellion against a context of absolute goodness.
- Rebellious agency is not an excess of action but a failure to follow through. God creates angels with a good will; the bad angels simply fail to accept all the goodness that God offers. This choice is actually a dissent. Thus devil is not evil by nature; by the choice or exercise of its own volitional existence, it fails to be good.
- For Augustine, a second text of Saint John's—"the devil sins from the beginning"—means that despite not being a part of Creation, evil is relentless and comprehensive. Nothing innocent remains in the rebellious soul. Furthermore, once begun, evil will never stop by itself. The devil is petulantly stubborn.
- In Augustinian terms, evil is a mode of using otherwise good realities. The evil does not necessarily infect the instrument; the key is the use to which we put the instrument. Against what he takes to be Origen's argument, that selfhood itself—and thus otherness from God—is the metaphysically sufficient reality that constitutes evil, Augustine says the decision to turn to the self, not the self in itself, is the source of evil.
- One way of getting at the core explanation of evil is to ask what causes evil. To ask this question is to seek the cause of the very first evil will, the first fault of the fallen angels. Augustine concludes that the evil act had no actual material point. An end was in sight, the perverse end of radical autonomous separation



from God, but this end cannot be understood except as derivative from the aim to reject the good that God had given.

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*Saint John's statement that "the devil did not stand fast in the truth" means, for Augustine, that wickedness is not natural.*

- And what caused that rejecting aim to develop? What caused Satan, when offered life, to shrug? There is no cause. There is no "efficient causality" in this case, Augustine says, only a deficient causality.

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## The Absurdity of Evil

- For many other early Christian and pagan thinkers, such as the Christian Origen, evil is contained within cyclical structures that constrain it and make it an integral part of a larger system, not a radical rupture in Creation. Irenaeus proposed that evil was a necessary stage of painful separation from a loving God. In such accounts evil is part of a larger system that will be wholly reconciled back to God, only to begin the whole cycle of creation, fall, redemption, restoration, and return, *ad infinitum*.
- For Augustine, endless cycles or necessity for evil or separation fails to sustain the distinctiveness of good and evil and undercuts creatures' attachment to the final moment of presumably consummated union in God.
- Such a view makes history both superficially frivolous and relentlessly despairing: Not only does nothing really matter, but what matters is the nothing—the absent thing that is yet to come but never arrives, for the arrival of each new event simply pushes the thing yet to come one step into the future. The idea of perfect reconciliation is bought at the price of infinite indeterminacy.

- Augustine struggles mightily against any veneer of dualism, either between God and some other malevolent force (as in Manicheism) or within God or God's plan, as in Origen. Augustine's account tries very hard to insist that God is wholly good and absolutely sovereign, and yet that evil is truly evil.
- Augustine feels compelled to affirm that evil is absurd, an inexplicable reality. For him the absurdity of evil is not an implication of his account that must be accepted, but one of its findings that should be expounded. For him, the emphasis on the absurdity of evil is not a limitation, but one of its central achievements.
- We are invited to see with new eyes—not as fallen creatures for whom sin and evil are all-too-explicable—as God does, the truly absurd and pathetic nature of Creation's own revolt against the loving Creator who gave it being in the first place.
- Recalling Augustine's aesthetic defense of evil in book 11 as a counterpoint to goodness, one might say that the rebel angels exist to show the full range of what creatures can do with the gifts God has given them.
  - Thus God enables Satan and the rebellious angels to use their agency even so far as to try to refuse that agency by attempting to refuse their being altogether.
  - In this way the whole account of the fall of the rebel angels that Augustine offers here, culminating in his depiction of their deficient causality, is not seen as a flaw in his overall account, but a positive and pedagogically fruitful explication of the actual nature of evil.



*Behind all these questions is a basic existential one: Is this account of evil workable?*



- Book 12 is about seeing evil as truly evil, to be befuddled by it, to see it as in itself annihilating of physical realities like one's own or other peoples' lives and of rationality and intelligibility at all.
- Still, we may wonder whether some questions remain unanswered or not answered sufficiently:
  - Is the overall privationist account of evil adequate?
  - Is Augustine trying to confuse us with his theodicy?
  - Is the idea of evil's *ex nihilo* entrance into reality as absurd truly accurate?
- Behind all these questions is a basic existential one: Is this account of evil workable? We have a clue to how Augustine will answer that by the end of book 12, for Adam has come on the scene. Adam is not just one human; he is, in a way, all humans; all humanity's destiny is contained in his flesh. In Augustine's mind, what happens to Adam has consequences for the rest of the species.

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### Questions to Consider

1. In book 12, Augustine discusses evil at length. What does he think evil is in its essence?
  2. Given this metaphysical and ontological account of evil, how does Augustine explain wicked acts? What, for example, causes the angels to fall? Can we conceive of evil doing in these terms?
  3. Do you think Augustine's account captures something important about the phenomenon of evil? Do you think it leaves anything important out?
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# Augustine and Original Sin (Book 13)

Death is everywhere in this book. It stands as a discrete topic and subtly lurks behind the other great topic, the human body. Augustine wants us to feel the stench and stiffness of suffering and death in our bodies as we move about in our daily life and work. We may be disturbed by so much attention to death. We do not think about it very often. And yet apart from birth it is, so far, the only reality guaranteed to be common to all human beings. Every one of us will die—some sooner, some later, but eventually all.

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## The Wages of Sin

- The idea of death in life was a well-established one for Augustine's age, within the Christian churches and outside them. And not only was the diagnosis of living death not unheard-of, there was a common prescription: Our solution was to flee this world by ourselves "dying" to it. Many early Christians eagerly sought martyrdom as a way to "get to God." It was a logical thing, to flee the world once you saw that it brought only death.
- Augustine was not wholly opposed to this rhetoric, but he was wary of where it might lead. The fault of our difficulty in this material world lay not in the world itself, but in our basic orientation toward it. Augustine's proposed strategy amounts to a new orientation that is the gracious gift of the one true healer, Christ.
- What is death, exactly? What does Augustine mean when he calls our existence a kind of death? Augustine understands death as not natural to the human condition. Augustine is a free interpreter

of scripture, but here he is clear that he believes that there was a literal historical Adam, created directly by God.

- › And yet, now we are fallen. Adam forsakes God—the “first death of the soul.” When Adam forsakes God, it means that God in turn has “forsaken” Adam, though the human sin is what has caused God to forsake him.
- › The first sin is disobedience; human nature thus became subject to decay, and we became “distracted” and torn in multiple directions. Because we cannot totally deny our good creation, we “come close to nothingness.”
- Note the crucially interior character of this first sin. The real sin occurs in secret, in the hidden interiority of the self. That is to say, the real sin is not the eating of the fruit; the real sin is the hiding, the attempt to create the secret, dark inaccessibility of the self. In this way sin is the creation of our privacy, our apartness from God.
- This hiding is dramatic and absurd, but the psychic drama it proclaims is actually more melodramatic than truly dramatic, for this rebellion is more fundamentally a dissent from a certain kind of action than it is a consent to a full, rival action. The core of this rebellion is to have an evil will, which is simply the act of valuing the self over God; that is, to take the self as the standard by which to judge and value all things, instead of listening to and trusting God.
- › Augustine makes very clear that the devil’s role was really more the fall guy than the main actor in the drama. Recall how the demons were able to seduce the Roman pagans to sacrifice to them and honor them with games and spectacles, but only because those pagans wanted to be seduced.
- › Similarly here: The serpent would have had no power to effect the sin had Adam not been receptive to his temptations.

- Indeed, to conceive of something as a temptation already bespeaks an ambivalence in one's soul about whether one's values and aims are most suitable for happiness. To feel tempted, for Augustine, is already to be fallen.

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*God created all things fundamentally good. Our captivity by fleshly ends and worldly goods, then, does not speak to any evil inherent in flesh or world, but rather to our own self-inflicted perversion of our appetites.*

- The description of the fall as trivial but devastating is worth reflection. The interiority of the act makes it seem insubstantial, but the consequence of the deed is truly dramatic, for it produces in us a powerful incoherence.
  - The first punishment was shame, which is a disharmony in the body, a frustrated recognition of a rebellion in our flesh that we find sometimes unable to put down. That is to say, the first perversion in which the soul delighted caused the division of the self into flesh versus spirit: will suffocated by appetite.
  - This punishment certainly feels like a kind of death. Furthermore, all inherit this punishment, for all inherit the condition: In Adam, human nature is vitiated and degraded. All suffer this death, for while our first parents were created upright, from their first wills' perversion followed "a chain of disasters" which affect us all, as we were all "in" Adam.
- Augustine characterizes the inherited condition of all humanity after the fall as a kind of living death. He uses death in a way we would characterize as metaphorical, and yet many who have experienced some form of despair might agree that his metaphorical use is not entirely hyperbolic.
  - While our bodies have not yet died, the Fall causes the immediate death of the soul, for our souls have rebelled

against the life-giving love of God. This death of the soul is what happens when God departs the soul.

- › We live with no hope, no real sense of meaning or joy, no true expectations for the future. In this condition, we are like zombies, living and dead at the same time, going through our days with the monotonous automaticity of the undead.

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## Transformation of Death

- All this raises a pointed question for Augustine. If we are partly dead, what would it mean to come alive?
- Augustine thought the Platonists were effectively embarrassed by their bodies. They saw the soul's attachment to the body as our problem and sought to teach the soul not to be afraid of leaving the body behind.
- Augustine did not think of our flesh *per se* as the locus of sin. He takes the Christian doctrine of God as direct creator of the whole world and the world as wholly good, and the Christian confession of Christ's resurrection and ascension, as demonstrating that neither materiality *per se* nor our embodiment is the problem; rather it is our way of being embodied, our way of relating to materiality, that is the problem.
- God created all things fundamentally good. Our captivity by fleshly ends and worldly goods, then, does not speak to any evil inherent in flesh or world, but rather to our own self-inflicted perversion of our appetites.
- Those who have been redeemed from the death of the soul and have God again in their souls will still suffer the death of the body. Although the souls of the redeemed are made pure across their histories, they are still suffering from the physical maladies of original sin in the corruption of their bodies; this is part of the

human race's destiny, until the end of time. Even Jesus's body was mortal.

- › We are called on not simply to accept this fact, but look forward to its transformation. For we know that the dead Jesus was resurrected, and resurrected in the flesh; so the body can be transformed.
- › The appropriate Christian response to physical death is to use it to the end of our proper conditioning—to see life as death, and reinterpret good life as “dying to the world” in order to achieve true life abundant. We do this by cultivating our faith.
- Effectively we should turn death into an act of martyrdom, a death with a purpose and a meaning as a witness to something larger than death itself, a witness to what has caused you to live in this way. This is a pretty remarkable thing to do, to appropriate the title of “martyr” for ordinary Christians living their everyday lives.
- The emotional work of this kind of martyrdom starts well before physical death. Its sufferings are twofold, and together they comprise a fundamental component of the Christian soul for Augustine. We are meant to experience them simultaneously, though he thinks we must cultivate each one separately in ourselves.
  - › First, we must own up to the reality of our genuine suffering here and now. We ought not flinch from our sufferings nor deny their reality. We must own up to all the pains that we feel and not try to deny in some sort of Stoic manner that they are not real.
  - › Second, we must also be constantly growing in anticipation of joy to come. And while this anticipation is no physical pain or suffering, it definitely dislodges us from slothful ease in our world today.



- › Both of these emotional practices are premised on a deepening understanding of the doctrine of the Resurrection, which is both restoration and transfiguration.

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## The Question of Responsibility

- Given Augustine's picture of what is voluntary and what is involuntary, how do we define responsibility? Putting aside the question of abstract legal fault, we have all been in situations where, though it was not obviously our fault, we were still the ones who had to figure out what to do about it.
- Many will be surprised that I might suggest that a picture of inherited sin that seems as bleak as Augustine's could have positive lessons for people today. But his was an activist and dynamic faith, seeking to reach out well beyond the churches' walls. It was meant to be empowering on the individual level as well—a word of liberation.
- It will help us to understand how this was possible if we reset our expectations about responsibility from a juridical understanding culminating in judgment, to a therapeutic understanding oriented toward analysis and repair.
- Augustine is talking about grace as divine medicine. For him, the church is better conceived as a hospital, and we are usefully understood in this life as recovering patients under the hand of a true—which does not mean gentle—healer.
- Augustine did not invent original sin, though he gave the most powerful and fruitful account of it that anyone has yet offered, and embedded

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it tightly in a larger account of the human condition and God's salvific action in which it made sense and played a functional role.

- In doing this, he was trying to come to grips with our human condition, to recognize the depths of our captivity to it, and to say that nonetheless this captivity is not the creation's fault, and thus not the Creator's fault. He tried to take with true moral seriousness the idea that we have a past and that we can track the whole course of human history as it vectors into a single human soul.

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### Questions to Consider

1. What do you think of Augustine's account of the relationship between human sin and human mortality? Does it illuminate something about sin? About death?
  2. What do you think of Augustine's claim that even if death is not a good thing, we can still use death well to make good come of it?
  3. Given this picture of voluntary and involuntary action, how can we be condemned justly? Can it be fair to be blamed for something you do if you do not understand the consequences of your action? Where does responsibility lie?
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# The Two Cities and the Two Loves (Book 14)

## Lecture 16

If everyone, saint and sinner alike, shares the same ailments, how can we learn to tell the good from the bad, or at least the less bad from the worse? In a way, book 14 is the most all-encompassing of the books in *The City of God*, for it attempts to describe the human condition in all its essentials after the Fall. It talks about it in terms of the human's core psychological dynamics, their emotional instability and "immaturity," especially as exhibited in our propensity toward anger and lust, and how these are all paradigmatically exhibited in human sexual relations.

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### The Two Cities

- Augustine needs to distinguish the citizens of the two cities for two reasons.
  - He wishes to resist those who believe deeply that the world is clearly divided between the righteous and the reprobate. For Augustine, the most voluble representatives were the Donatists.
  - He must account for what we can call the obscurity of vice—the fact that sin, because it is disguised inside the self, is not obviously and reliably trackable in incontestable ways.
- Augustine roots the key to human behavior in psychology. In the Fall, human nature was changed, and Augustine thinks we can begin to differentiate the two cities by way of humans' divergent attitudes toward that change.
- In principle, as belief informs behavior so the inner psychology should be manifest in the outer behavior. But its hiddenness and

the jumbled nature of our inner lives typically make it very hard to employ.

- › No one is wholly and purely rooted in one set of dispositions: The good are weak and even the wicked can commit a noble deed. So the connections between our beliefs and our behaviors are at best only loose.
- › The task of interpreting others' acts (and even our own) is beset with innumerable difficulties. We can never fully trust our own best judgment.

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## The Two Loves

- Augustine begins by trying to characterize humanity in terms of two diverse loyalties through a discussion of the flags flown by the two cities. These two standards symbolize the two loves, which stand for two different dispositions embodied in their devotees:
  - › The earthly city reflects "love of self even to contempt of God"
  - › The city of God reflects "love of God even to contempt of self."
- He explains that "flesh" stands for an attitude of valuing our physical lives above our spiritual ones. The point is that living according to this world is bad. Thus the cause of sin lies in the soul, not fundamentally in the flesh.
- Sin is, fundamentally, to live according to self-will, which is self-destructive and self-deceptive. It was not flesh that dragged down and entrapped the material soul; rather, it was the sinful soul that made flesh corruptible.



*For Augustine this Stoic proposal is wrong, especially for Christians because of the particular models that scripture offers of exemplary human behavior.*



In rebelling against God, humanity has rebelled as well against God's order, and thus against itself.

- Humans are alike in the fact that we love; even as we differ dramatically in the facts of what we love. The central organizing principle for ordering and differentiating all of humanity is not belief, not action, not thinking; what differentiates the citizens of the two cities is their different objects of love.

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### Emotions after the Fall

- According to the Stoics, the emotions are derived from the character of the person, and we should subject all our attachments to remorseless scrutiny. When we do, we see that all our emotional responses are the consequences of overestimating the significance of whatever episode solicited the response. We should work to eliminate it, replacing desire with will, joy with gladness, and fear with caution.
- For Augustine, this Stoic proposal is wrong, especially for Christians because of the particular models that scripture offers of exemplary human behavior.
  - The Stoics' dream of *apatheia* could be good if it were understood as calmness, purity, integrity, and stability. But in this life, such stability is impossible, and when anyone approaches such a state, it is not tranquility that they realize, but the moral defect of stupor.
  - Augustine also accuses the Stoics of existential inadequacy. They deny the possibility, for example, of wise grief. But we should feel sadness and grief for our own condition, still so far away from redemption and fulfillment. Sometimes emotions such as grief and fear are signs of growing moral maturity.
- Both sides agree that the emotions are essential to our affective orientation to the world. They differ over the proper content of

emotions and their different judgments about the right affective orientation to take toward the world.

- Christians can know they are mistaken from an entirely different authority than philosophical argument—the example of scripture. Jesus is represented as being profoundly moved in episodes in his life; and of course he suffers the Passion, the ultimate experience of the world affecting him.
- Paul, too, exemplifies the good human life, and in doing so exhibits the full emotional range, from the deepest despair to the heights of exultation and joy. All of them are good, for Paul's emotions are ordered to the glory of God, not his own anxious self-interest; his fear, his jealousy, his anger are all holy emotions.
- Augustine's critique of the Stoics tacitly answers a fundamental question: What does proper human life look like?
  - › Proper life, he says, was undisturbed love and gladness and a smooth and easy emotional life marked by happiness, tranquility, gratitude, and awe—before the Fall.
  - › There were no negative emotions because there were no evils to prompt such emotions, no sources of suffering or pain outside the self, and no incoherence or rebellion within it.
- The instability and constant flux of our emotional life is due to our rebellion against God. But the punishment is not the affections themselves, only the anarchic way they course through our everyday life.
- We have to come to know ourselves as distinct from ourselves in a way. That splitting, that incoherence: that is sin. Grief and fear and pain arise directly from our bad judgments and actions and indirectly from the disordered relations between the soul and the body. The punishment, then, fits the crime perfectly.

- The irony of this punishment is that it is precisely the opposite of what we thought we would gain. We wanted what we thought was mastery and were delivered over to servitude. The pride of the transgressor was worse than the sin itself and so we are made impotent by our very desire for inordinate power. This is the deep logic of punishment: the most immediate victim of our sin is ourselves.

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## True Emotions and Human Sexuality

- Augustine is often accused of being against the body and especially of being against the sexual body. In fact, unlike other theologians of his time and many non-Christian thinkers as well, he thought sexuality was part of our created nature, created as a good by God, not a consequence of our fallenness.

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*There were no negative emotions  
because there were no evils to  
prompt such emotions, no sources  
of suffering or pain outside the self,  
and no incoherence or rebellion  
within it.*

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- For Augustine, the problem with human sexuality lies not in the fact that we have sex but in the fact that we have sex badly, and the badness with which we have sex serves him as an especially visible site for examining the calamity that has befallen us on account of what we did.
- Consider why we feel so embarrassed, even ashamed about sex. Augustine's answer is that in sexual activity, we are seen to be not simple voluntary agents, but rather a passel of involuntary appetites.
  - Sexuality is distinct from other lusts because it is more totally under the command of ungovernable passion than any other sphere of human behavior. This is why it causes us shame.

- Augustine is complaining of the loss of the simple harmony of self with self: The soul is ashamed of the body's resistance to its commands. Anger and lust were not naturally part of the human's healthy state before the Fall. After the Fall, it seems that all the world is a matter of domination, not just interpersonal relations, but even relations wholly inside the person.

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*Augustine worked in an  
environment of profound suspicion  
of human embodiment and  
sexuality. Augustine's claims,  
which sound to us so antiworldly,  
were liberating and worldly in  
their setting.*

- What exactly is it about sex that Augustine thinks we find so fundamentally embarrassing, even humiliating? Crucial here is the character of sexual activity as effacing self-control, even, Augustine thinks, effacing mental experience altogether.
  - In our fallen state we do not experience that loss of control in positive terms, as a liberation from subjectivity or escape from self. Rather we experience it as an event of domination by our lusts.
  - For Augustine, the reason lust exists is that we rebelled against God because we did not want to serve God. So now all serve, not themselves, but one part of themselves. Thus, this most intimate, most existentially consequential act is experienced as reminding us of our separation from ourselves and our subjugation to blind lust.
- Our agency and our persons are not in our control, and this loss of control is most visible in sex. But sex is not in itself sin, nor the locus of sin, nor evil. Its anarchy is merely a vivid sign of how far we have fallen.



- Augustine does not say that sexuality is evil or satanic. On the contrary, sexuality is good but disordered; it may be used, and may use us, for profoundly unloving, uncharitable, self- and other-destroying, violent, dominating ends.
- This is news for many who imagine Augustine as being behind many of our problems with sexuality. They accuse him of driving a wedge between sexual passion and reproduction. This suggests that, before Augustine, no such division was apparent. There are two ways to take this claim; in each, things are more complex than first appears.
- Augustine spent a good deal of his intellectual resources thinking about human sexuality. Not with an intent to warp some healthy inheritance, but to give such matters expression in a new way.
  - › Augustine worked in an environment of profound suspicion of human embodiment and sexuality. Augustine's claims, which sound to us so antiworldly, were liberating and worldly in their setting.
  - › His predecessors and contemporaries assumed sexual intercourse was so obviously bad as not to need analysis. In contrast, Augustine challenged this silence, and set a new course by arguing that humans are created with sexual natures.
- The whole point of Augustine's exposition of human psychology and sexuality was to explore how the logic of the distinction between the two cities should play out in our world today. The aim was to distinguish them in a way that was able to resist the presumption of confident moralist discrimination without escaping into the stratosphere of theological abstraction.
- The two cities, of God and of the world, have two loves, of God and self. This is a real distinction, but it is doubly difficult to discern in the present age.

### Questions to Consider

1. Does it make sense to talk about the world divided between those driven by “love of God even to the contempt of self” and those driven by “love of self even to the contempt of God”? Why can Augustine talk of them as two forms of love, even if one is bad and the other good? Wouldn’t a lot of people fall in-between? What do you think Augustine would say to this?
  2. How does Augustine understand our emotional lives? Does he think that *apatheia*—a calm implacability—is a realistic goal for humans or even an ideal to be aimed at? Why or why not? And if not, does he think that we simply suffer our emotions with no way to control them?
  3. What do you think of Augustine’s view of human sexuality, both before the Fall and after it?
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# Augustine's Scriptural History (Books 15–17)

## Lecture 17

“On or about December 1910, human character changed,” wrote the great modernist Virginia Woolf in 1924. For her, the change in human nature was akin to exile from the Garden of Eden. Modernist writers were not simply dismissive of religion. They were obsessed by the problem of reestablishing fruitful contact with our new knowledge in a way that transmuted antiquity into something inhabitable today. They imagined that the answer would be universally applicable; because they assumed there was only one path of modernization, there would be only one way to be religious in modernity.

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### Modernist Approach to History

- According to Karl Marx, “Men make their own history ... under ... circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past”; that is, how we think in the present—the very framework into which we fit new events—is powerfully, almost determinately, informed by the past. Yet, many thinkers believe that we have entered an entirely new age that is historically unprecedented. For these thinkers, history can teach us nothing, or next to nothing.
- The new situation is called “modernity,” and the first thinkers who formulated it meant it to express a crisis of relation to our traditions—a feeling of irrevocable loss. They saw religion as a set of antiquated intuitions and passions steeped in a reactionary, resentful nostalgia for an earlier, wholly imagined, integrity of feeling, thought, action, character, and cosmos.

- Today our challenge is pluralism—the challenge of inhabiting a world filled with many kinds of belief and unbelief. Modernity is not the only formulation of this problem, nor has modernity let us escape it. Other ages confronted analogous problems and their accomplishments may have something useful to teach us today.



*God's determinate historical presence in Jesus serves as both an exemplary pattern of a human life and announces the salvation of humanity to a fallen world.*



- Such is the case with Augustine. He too underwent the wrenching transition from the end of one age to the beginning of another. All his writing is gripped by the question of how to render useful a heritage now grown radically problematic but that retained some claim of continuity and that he wanted to pass on to the future.

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## Augustinian Theology of History

- Augustine is one of the greatest of thinkers to reflect on the purpose for writing and reading history. His vision of history decisively shaped the next thousand years and more of European historiography.
  - › When compared with such classical historical thinkers as Herodotus and Thucydides, he was far more like us, particularly in his rejection of the idea that human history is trapped in repetitive patterns that we can come to understand, anticipate, and master.
  - › He is also like us in his affirmation of the uniqueness and singularity of human history whose significance is granted not by the patterns it reveals, but in the story it embodies and the way it unfolds a singular revelation of God.

- Augustine's writings often discuss the significance of historical events. Most notable for him, of course, is the idiosyncratic individual life of Jesus of Nazareth that reveals the route to reconciliation between the beings of determinate creation, and all being's unconditioned ground in the Creator.
- God's determinate historical presence in Jesus serves as both an exemplary pattern of a human life and announces the salvation of humanity to a fallen world. The Incarnation thus reveals, for Augustine, the ultimate structure of history from which the other real historical turning points have their significance: the Fall, the Election of Israel, Pentecost, and the Last Judgment.
  - Other events are intelligible and have interest and meaning, but their meaning is borrowed from and echoes or recapitulates these crux events, and their significance is real only insofar as they express moments that are typologically and sacramentally significant.
  - We are able to perceive meaningful moments not through reading human history, but through reading the larger salvation history from Adam to Christ to today.
- Crucial for Augustine is the story of the two cities, mapped out by Cain and Abel and by Romulus and Remus: manifestations of the struggle between siblings over goods they should share. By tracing the history of the two cities in time, Augustine offers a kind of theological journalism: an interpretation of events that uses the theological categories of the Christian faith to show people directly how those categories usefully illuminate the everyday world we inhabit and indirectly how to use those categories on their own.
- For Augustine, the Bible is the true moral lens that lets us see the world correctly. We must replace the old stories with new stories, for they are the true ones. His is an allegorical mode of

reading, meant to cultivate in us what we can call a typological imagination.

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## The Typological Reading of History

- The term “typological imagination” refers to the way ordinary events in our lives can signify another event, revealing its true significance. In fact, all our thinking is frankly comparative in this way. All our actions are not simply there in their glorious irreducible singularity; they are almost all tokens of some underlying type. Breaking a diet, or cheating on an exam, or on your spouse, echoes the Fall; a conversion recapitulates the Resurrection; a judge handing down a sentence, the Last Judgment.
- This picture of a life lived in reading is powerful and vivid. It begins in recognizing that we are formed by texts, so that ethical change and maturation come from exchanging less adequate narratives for more adequate ones. And these practices of reading take place in religious communities, where others guide and shape our understanding.
- Augustine is important not because he is innovative, but because his deployment of this strategy becomes the prototype for all other uses of it in the West.
  - In general, Augustine thinks that scripture is best understood by employing a simplified language and fitting its formulations to the physical minds of humans, to make the stories’ meanings vivid to as large an audience as possible.
  - Conversely, at other times Augustine tries to teach his audience to understand historical events by expanding and reshaping them to fit the overall story he wants them to find in history. The stories should be read as expressing fundamental historical themes. Thus the story of Babel is not just about Babylon, but about the contest between sin and grace in the world, and therefore his “two cities” schema.

- While the first example diminishes the text, the second amplifies it; both tactics serve the strategic aim of showing his audience how the Bible can offer a moral and spiritual frame within which past and present and future should be understood.
- Such a typological imagination creates a certain kind of self. It is not simply informative; it is also quite powerfully formative. To experience the meaning of time in this way is to feel how we are divided: We're never fully here, but always caught up in various historical moments.
- The word Augustine uses for this experience is *distentio*, an experience of being stretched out across time. Feeling it is meant to make us feel more pointedly our need for reintegration and more vividly to seek God's help.
- Seeking God's help is why this experience of reading is so integral to the formation of the Christian community in general. The church's fundamental activity, along with praising God, is to call upon God for help. Far from being simply a way of talking about the past, Augustine's method is a profound strategy for forming the Christian self.
- Augustine's proposal for reading history and for seeing one's whole life as a practice of reading is a powerful one—both psychologically and historically. It has been tremendously influential in Christian practice, and stands behind the continued insistence among the churches of the West that the Bible is

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a text that should be read and reread by Christians throughout their lives.

- Yet in the modern world, we are typically skeptical of such typological efforts.
  - First, this approach seems to not take the literality of history with sufficient seriousness. Why is the most important thing about an event that it reinforces some other moral whose point we can know only abstractly? Why isn't cheating on my spouse just bad?
  - Second, the typological enterprise seems to have confused "understanding" with "decoding," perceiving all as a cryptogram whose singular meaning can be definitely unlocked. But to unlock it we need a key that already tells us what it "really" means.
  - The third tricky thing about allegory is the inescapable ascription of authorial intent and the apparently inescapable fact of arbitrariness in the allegory itself. By "arbitrary" I mean the original sense here of will, of the decision of a writer to make this stand for that. Why do we think these particular moments, these significances, are the ones that govern history's structure? Why could there not be some other set?
- These are powerful criticisms. The only way they might be met is by showing, in the execution of the community's practices of reading that in fact a community can avoid them—that a community can understand history with as much seriousness as history demands; that its



*Why is the most important thing about an event that it reinforces some other moral whose point we can know only abstractly? Why isn't cheating on my spouse just bad?*





understanding of history does respect the reality of history in its manifold details, and so ends in no oversimplified conclusions; and that finally its vision of what truly matters in history proves itself true.

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### Questions to Consider

1. What do you think of how Augustine construes what he sees as problematic anthropomorphizing in the Bible (e.g., when God is said to get angry)? Is this a useful way of thinking theologically, or does something important get lost?
  2. What does Augustine think is the point of letting history go so long before ending it at the Last Judgment? Why did all this history have to happen?
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# Translating the *Imperium* (Book 18)

Understanding begins as a matter of translation, of taking one set of details and transposing them onto another, to reveal some similarities of meaning between the two. Book 18 completes the survey of the history of the earthly city from Assyria to Rome and recounts the history of the city of God from the Israelite prophets to the coming of Christ and the Christian church. It turns from the biblical narratives to the pagan histories and asks its readers to imagine these histories from a scriptural perspective.

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## The Earthly Babylon

- More deeply, it asks a simple question: After Rome, what? It addresses how we should reconceive the idea of *imperium* once the worldly empires have fallen and how we should translate the governance of history—translate the past for the future.
- The word “translate” here more generally refers to the movement of world governance, imperial preeminence, from one polity to another—from Babylon to Assyria to Egypt to Persia to Greece to Rome.
- Now that Rome has been sacked, Augustine thinks the *imperium* has been translated once again, this time from Rome to God. Or rather, that this final translation has now been announced; now we are beginning the translation of governance from an earthly reign to the true *imperium* of God.
- Augustine also was concerned with the translation of Judaism into Christianity because it was not only Rome that flowed into the city of God, for Augustine; it was also the People Israel. The idea that

Judaism's heritage is now folded into Christianity is a part of this translation practice, too—and a far more troubling one.

- Because much of world history was not directly known by the ancient Israelites, Augustine uses classical sources, not biblical, to construct his account of the history of the ancient world. Augustine is still able to extract an essentially biblical message from his narration.
  - Rome is not conceived here as superior to Assyria; they are fundamentally the same to Augustine, for both are human attempts at domination.
  - He discovers a basically theological story in which Assyria and Rome are two types of human *imperia*, both implicitly contending with God for true sovereignty. They are, however, different from each other; Babylon and Assyria were sinful humanity's parody of the Old Covenant, while Rome is sinful humanity's parody of the New Covenant.
- He complements the theological story with the psychological one he developed from Sallust, about the *libido dominandi*, showing how the human desire for *imperium* always seeks to dominate. Not only domination's spatial reach is extended in this generalization of *imperium*: The type of activity that counts as a manifestation of the *libido dominandi* is broadened as well.
- Domination is the basic lesson to be drawn from the logic of human empire: However noble or primitive its origins may be, the structural trajectory, both psychologically and sociologically, is to make the polity long to bring all under its control and to elevate the ruler into a quasi-divine status.
- Human history is therefore a history of confusion, with a false clarity imposed by various kinds of force. The earthly city means confusion: debates are inevitable and intractable. Its unity is not a spontaneous harmony of a multitude but must be incessantly

reestablished through multitudinous forms of violence. It is a rigid singularity, imposed precariously only by force, and typically the force of *imperium*. In this way, the history of the world is a history of domination.

- In the earthly city, human society is at war with itself because everyone desires some of the same things, and each is at war with herself or himself, because our desires are inconstant. Just as the earthly city has no true harmony or coherence, neither has it true originality. It has no novelty, but simply reiterates its own claim to be free of divine sponsorship.
- In sum, Augustine says the earthly city's day is already over. It goes on, but it lives entirely in the past. Its time is out of joint with the new eon that the Christian churches proclaim and pray to represent. It is already dead; it simply doesn't know it.

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## The Heavenly Jerusalem

- In contrast to the parodic incoherence of the pagan political actors and philosophers who sought answers by human powers, the harmony and unity of the city of God is communicated by the prophetic conveyance of divine words, received gracefully by the community and obeyed as true nourishment.
- None of this about the heavenly Jerusalem is actually true, and Augustine knows it.
- The city of God on pilgrimage still lives in the morally and spiritually homogeneous era of the world and partakes in all ways in the tedium and sinfulness of humanity before the Second Coming. This fact severely complicates, some would say utterly obstructs, any hope for a stable or durable progress or sanctification of humans in the church during history.
  - There will be fallbacks, failures, and all sorts of other disappointments.

- › The churches will grow, shrink, be filled with saints, and overflow with sinners.

- This raises deep questions about the relationship between exegesis and ontology, between what we are supposed to take history to signify typologically and its actual first-order experience and significance for its inhabitants. Furthermore, there are deep questions for members of the churches here, about whether this leaves the city of God too fugitive in history.

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*Augustine says the earthly city's day is already over. It goes on, but it lives entirely in the past. Its time is out of joint with the new eon that the Christian churches proclaim and pray to represent.*

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- Augustine's answer to the question of the meaning of history is simple. The Israelite prophets and pagan sages anticipate and prefigure the Christian Gospel by offering hints of and clues to its coming that signify something far beyond their literal significance. So we live in the "now" of the church by understanding that the "then" of the past was always leading to this church, in some way intending it, prefiguring it in partial ways.

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## Prefiguration and Supersession

- Prefiguration means that we must learn to see all human actions, including our own, as having their full and complete determination at some point in the indefinite future, so that all our actions now must be undertaken with fear and trembling in the knowledge that they will receive their full and final meaning at a time that we cannot control.
- The story of Jonah, the whale, and Nineveh and how Augustine handles it show how prefiguration works. It has at least three distinct layers of meaning for Augustine.

- The sheer events of Jonah's life: being called to Nineveh, flight from that calling, discovery that he cannot flee from God, preaching, Nineveh's repentance, and Jonah's petulant response to God's mercy.
  - The ever-present, indeed relentless, mercy of God—first to Jonah, then to the whole city of Nineveh, then to Jonah again.
  - The way he was taken up by God in a larger plan than he ever had for himself and used as a prominent tool of God's providential governance of the world.
- In this way Jonah prefigures Christ, who is the preeminent and perfect example of God using Creation to govern creation. Christ's human nature is prefigured by Jonah's acts even as Christ's divine nature is prefigured by God's use of Jonah. Jonah's just a character in this story—not the main actor at all.
- Augustine lived in a civilization of utter continuity that venerated age in a way that we do not. In such a setting, a tradition like Christianity, whose oldest relative was the primitive desert tribe of the Israelites, was suspect.
- So Augustine sets out to show that the prophets actually predate the pagan philosophers, and while the prophets in turn are not as old as the Greek theological poets, those poets are in turn less ancient than Moses.
  - Thus the wisdom of the city of God is more ancient than that of the earthly city, though Augustine

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*According to Augustine, the people of Israel refused the promise of God and so now are outside the salvation history that continued from ancient Israel through Jesus Christ into the church.*

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grudgingly admits that there was pre-Mosaic wisdom in Egypt and elsewhere.

- A more troubling way in which the past is said to prefigure the Christian present is how Augustine understands the relationship between ancient Israel and the Christian churches. Although the ancient community of believers plays a role in the history of salvation and the tradition of ancient Israel is honored, for contemporary Judaism Augustine's vision is ambivalent.
  - He affirms that the Jews are the residual people of the first promise and that the first promise was important as prefiguring the coming of Christ. The history of Israel is important, but can be properly understood only as leading to Christianity.
  - The people of Israel refused the promise of God and so now are outside the salvation history that continued from ancient Israel through Jesus Christ into the church. So the Jews are not properly saved.
- Supersessionism, the idea that Christianity supersedes Judaism, engendered a great deal of anti-Judaic violence over the centuries and curdled into the more savage idea of anti-Semitism, the idea that the Jews as a race are in some way marked out as wicked and evil.
- Another part of the legacy of Augustine's allegorical reading of Judaism is his insistence not only that the Jews of his day are an important reminder of God's promise to Christianity, but that they are themselves a salvifically significant people.
- Augustine wants to ensure a certain level of ambiguity among Christians about their comprehension of God's purposes—a vision of the world that is simultaneously confident about the promises of God in Christ and uncertain about how those promises will be and are being fulfilled in believers' lives and

the lives of others. Specifically, he wants to promote two kinds of ambiguity: temporal and spatial.

- We should be humbly uncertain about where we are when it comes to enumerating who is inside the city of God and who is not. Even in the heartland of the pagan religious traditions themselves, Augustine finds moments of true witness to Christ: Job, for example, or the mysterious oracles of the Sibylline prophecies, which we now know point to Christ.
  - › Christ, in his life, used all for good, moving from humiliation to exaltation. So should we treat our own challenges as opportunities for spiritual growth. We know neither who among our opponents is our true enemy nor who will turn out to be our true friend.
  - › The city of God, when it is on pilgrimage, should deal with the wicked by using the suffering caused thereby to exercise patience, charity, and forgiveness.
- We should also be humbly uncertain about when we are—what time it is in relation to the Last Days. Hence, against those devotees of apocalyptic eschatology, he insists that we must not attempt to anticipate the Last Judgment. Against those who see a fixed time frame for the church's persecutions, he insists that there are no limits we could imagine to the times that the church will be persecuted.

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### Questions to Consider

1. What do you think of Augustine's proposal for how Christians should understand the ongoing life of Judaism?
  2. What is the relevance of Augustine's vision of world history for his account of the salvation history of the People Israel, Jesus Christ, and the Christian churches?
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# Happiness and Politics

## (Book 19)

### Lecture 19

Given that the widespread classical conviction that the richest form of life is that which is involved not just in private pursuits of happiness but takes some direct responsibility for the common good of the civic public order, the fact that Augustine engages the question of how caring for worldly politics can help Christians realize their spiritual ends makes sense. For the readers of *The City of God*, and especially Christian grandees particularly worried about the relation between their Christian faith and their duties to the commonwealth, this is something of a secular climax for the work.

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### The Happiness Debate

- Augustine discusses the pagan philosophers' analysis of the various ideal templates for human life, the various ways in which they have mapped the nature of and prospects for human happiness, given various conceptions of our nature and end.
- Amid this bewildering diversity, Augustine agrees with Varro that really only one truly wise view is possible, that of the "old Academy," which affirmed a life that cared for body and soul in community and with due attention to both contemplation and worldly action.
  - But Augustine says that Christians have a distinct vision of the end of human life that stands in profound and unanticipated tension with all these pagan accounts. It differs from them because both the nature of happiness and how one might attain it must be radically transfigured. The right Christian story must refuse the pagan way of conceiving the challenges facing human life and elaborate its own.

- The highest good that Christians seek is eternal life, but Christians understand themselves to be doubly incapacitated in the pursuit of that end. They know they cannot know the proper nature of this good, nor can they do the things necessary to attain it, without divine help.
- Thus Christians are constantly made more aware of and must constantly publicly confess their need of faith and grace. The good life is not found here on earth; this life is too fragile, and true harmony of body and spirit is never reached in this life.
- Even virtue's life on earth must "wage perpetual war," against the vices: the virtue of temperance in unending resistance to desires of flesh; prudence in a constant monitoring for evil; justice in an endless struggle to order all that is always tending entropically toward disorder; and courage in the need to bear with patience the evils of this world.
- Yet we cannot conclude that our happiness lies in escaping our embodied condition and becoming a sort of Stoic sage who confuses insensate stupor with true tranquility, or a philosopher like Cato who conflated the end of life with ending this life, seeking secure and settled happiness through an escapist suicidal flight.
- For Augustine, true virtues can exist only in those in whom there is true piety and godliness, and even so true virtue does not promise full happiness here; we can only be happy in hope. According to Augustine, then, Christians differ from pagan philosophers both in their conception of the good and in their understanding of how that good will be realized in their own lives.

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*All the routes to happiness that  
the philosophers and others have  
scouted out are shown to be  
inadequate.*

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- All the routes to happiness that the philosophers and others have scouted out are shown to be inadequate. This world is filled with opportunities for destabilizing misery, and any attempt to avoid that misery would simply leave us more miserable still. The world for Christians is full of blessings, but no matter how cannily we seek them, none offers secure happiness.
- The first four chapters of book 19 are a classic example of a well-established philosophical genre in the ancient world—calmly and lucidly laying out the possible options for the wise man to consider in the leisure of his study.
- Augustine says this whole approach is built on the illusion that some technique or trick or gimmick that will help us acquire this happiness for ourselves. This idea is the root of our error.
- Ironically, the very failure of our hopes reveals a clue to a better way. The ways in which our happiness is vexed, in their various modes of frustration, exhibit the depth and breadth of the universal longing for happiness. For Augustine, the true happiness must be the truest kind of peace. Once happiness is reimagined as peace, we have a useful concept for understanding any society.
- In looking for happiness, we have been subtly misconceiving our desired end. We imagine we can achieve happiness by doing something. But peace is not something you do. Peace is something you are.
  - Describing our end as peace challenges the presumption that our capacities for agency are a centrally useful tool in our quest for happiness. Perhaps our end is not something we can accomplish, but gift to us that we must at best receive.
  - Christians thus face something of a quandary. The conditions of sinful worldly existence make our lives inhospitable sites for the cultivation of our true happiness, which is genuine peace.

The problem then becomes how we should use our agency to seek peace.

- Christians should seek their happiness in hope and use their agency to fulfill their duties of care for the world. To do this for the earthly city requires divine direction and guidance. Thus true virtue works in the earthly city by using the goods and ills of this life to achieve its ends, which are various kinds of peace, from domestic peace to the civic peace of the city.

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### Political Morality and Justice

- In explicitly political terms, citizens of the heavenly city should care for the earthly city's sustenance, at least with regard to their common interest in peace and order. The issue is how exactly Christians should coordinate their efforts on pilgrimage toward the city of God to seek the peace of the earthly city.
- Our proper expectations for political life should be minimal; this minimum of expectation allows Christians to participate in worldly political life, with one crucial provision: that the temporal authorities not impede the religion. All the externals of life are unimportant if the Christian churches can obey the law of Christ.
- While the agents of the earthly city work desperately, though futilely, to secure an ultimate peace, the citizens of the heavenly city can work alongside them as long as they understand their hopes cannot rest in this world; they must seek true peace using temporal things and reside in this world as in captivity.
- This minimalist vision of what politics can accomplish rests on the conviction that the realm of human politics is in an important and inescapable way, tragic. That is, in this sin-riddled world, individuals and groups will find their political hopes and expectations vexed by the very conditions that give rise to the need for politics.

- Politics is the coordination of desires among different people with different desires, and whose individual desires are not even themselves collectively coherent or durably stable. It is an attempt to create conditions in which humans can flourish, but which at best only partially satisfy our ends. This view understands politics as always shadowed by the threat—and not infrequently by the reality—of violence.
- The conditions of the fallen world and the unruliness of our fallen wills make compulsion necessary. Thus compromise is not only imperfect, but typically held together by the tacit threat of violence. So force is necessary. Augustine reframes the issue: The question is not about whether Christians should participate in social life, but how.

➤ Augustine offers the example of the hard case: the judge who, as part of the legitimate civil authority, is compelled to use violence in order to determine the truth and who may, in fact, kill the one person from whom he might have learned that truth.

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*Our proper expectations for political life should be minimal; this minimum of expectation allows Christians to participate in worldly political life, with one crucial provision: that the temporal authorities not impede the religion.*

➤ Augustine takes the judge's tragic and paradoxical situation as a kind of summit from which we may view the whole expanse of the miserable necessities of human society. And it raises a profound question: Given such inescapable tragedy, should the judge serve, should any of us serve?

➤ Augustine's answer: Sociality is part of our existence, required for our flourishing, but accepting this burden may involve

manifold tragic necessities. Christians should accept these duties: If they do not, the social order may perish.

- We may need to use violence in order to protect the blessings of society as a whole. It is a moral duty to engage in these sorts of activities, though they may, accidentally and in no way as part of the essence of the thing, cause unjust suffering to innocent victims. But they should cause us torment.
- Augustine does not excuse the judge from involvement, nor does he exculpate him for the evils he causes, however inadvertently he causes them. Instead he says the judge should feel these evils as evils. He should not deny their reality, but recognize that the evils we cause to happen in this world are genuine evils, and while we may be obliged to inflict them, that necessity does not erase those evils or our complicity in them.

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## The Nature of the Commonwealth

- With this vision of the darkness and tragedy of political life in place, Augustine turns back to his philosophical dispute with Cicero about the analytic nature of the commonwealth. Augustine argues that since justice is a matter of giving all their due, a city that does not give God God's due is not just, and thus not a city. Because God was never worshipped in pagan Rome, justice was never done there, and the city was never a true city, at least on Cicero's definition.
- This argument is a critique of Cicero's analytic political vocabulary, and by extension the dominant political understanding of the ancient world. Justice, Augustine is saying, is first and foremost a form of worship. True justice is not defined by mere equity. For justice to be truly good, it must flow from some source other than our perception of what is our due. Our due is what God has decided to give us, far beyond any merit we might conceive.

- For Augustine, what God has done to justice is like what God has done to cities: Every city, to be a real city, must be the city of God. Cities may think that they are systems of justice, righteous noble nations, but no earthly city is actually that.
- Cities are defined by their common object of love. Yet they aspire to so much more: Justice and cities are to be founded on grounds fundamentally other than what we, in our fallenness, have imagined them to be. Cain's city must become the New Jerusalem, but it cannot become that from within history; its healing must come from without.

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### Questions to Consider

1. What do you think of Augustine's proposal about the necessity of using force and violence in ordering society (i.e., in political matters) in book 19, chapter 6? To what degree do you think that vision is related to his understanding of human sin, and is that a good or a bad thing?
  2. In book 19, chapters 11–13, Augustine discusses the relationship between happiness and peace. How does Augustine think they are related? Can we say that for Augustine, happiness and peace are the same thing? Why or why not? What do you think of Augustine's understanding of human desire for happiness and peace?
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# Judgments, Last and Otherwise (Book 20)

**B**ook 20 is a study not just of the Last Judgment, but of the meaning and purpose of judgment in general, a reflection on the meaning and significance of Creation's history, and an indirect reflection on how well we can understand the end of time. These topics are popular for spiritual and religious thinkers and popular targets for their opponents. Some philosophers have taken Christians' interest in a Last Judgment as a consummate example of their resentment at those who reject the idea that the meek will inherit the earth or as hostility toward our existence in this life.

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## The Limits of Knowing

- The German theologian Ernst Käsemann has said that "apocalyptic is the mother of theology." He meant that early Christians' expectations of the immediate end of the world, continually frustrated, provoked believers into theological investigations of why the delay had occurred and what it might possibly mean. From these questions, others began to arise about the nature of the end and the logic behind its necessity, whence spring most of the theological energies that have occupied the Christian world ever since. To ask about the apocalypse is to ask indirectly about the legitimacy of the theological speculation in the Christian life.
- › Both of these points of view—skepticism about Christian apocalyptic preoccupation and interest in how Christian theology goes about its eschatological duties—gain interesting illumination from thinking about what Augustine says can, and cannot, be known about the last things.



- In this book Augustine critiques the repeated practice of looking for concrete predictions of the coming of the End of Days, urging what he sees as a better approach: to think about the end of time in a way that encourages us to abandon the quest for concrete forebodings of the apocalypse and seek to become people who will be ready for the end of time whenever it arrives.
- In thinking about the Last Judgment, Augustine is especially emphatic that scripture is the sole canonical source of inquiry, because these matters lie outside the realm of natural reason at the edges of created order where the contingency of creation is revealed. Reason cannot determine the actual contours of created contingency; it can only respond to those edges when they appear, and their correct response is to stop.
- Augustine uses the issues around the Last Judgment as a teaching device to show his audience how to read scripture as a guide to life in this world. He shows that the struggle to “read” the Last Judgment properly is just as hard as the struggle to understand scripture’s proposals about the rest of life.
- According to Augustine, we must master the difficult task of admitting the limits of our knowing: affirming the truth of theological claims without presuming that we understand what they mean. We are tempted to affirmations of complete clarity as an anxious response to our authentic experience of the world as a profound ambivalence and ambiguity.
- As an example, Augustine offers the distribution of good and evil in our world and the deep moral obscurity that a clear-eyed assessment of that distribution would suggest. Punishments and rewards seem not to track with any moral pattern. Not only is good not always rewarded, nor good reliably rewarded and evil punished, nor good reliably harmed while evil predictably benefits. Rather, good generally does seem to get rewarded and evil does seem to harm itself, but the exceptions are so

vast and frequent as to make that general pattern insufficiently visible.

- The proper response is humility. In the mysteries of human affairs, Augustine insists that God's judgment is still present, even when it can't be observed. We know that God's final judgments are just from the moral framework of the story of the cosmos that the Christian churches offer us and within which we set experience of the world.
- The point is not to care about things in this life too much, not because they don't matter, but because they are obscure. We have to see that judgment is God's task, not ours; we will await the judgment of God in patience and learn to see life as a trial and a training ground for that.

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## God's Judgment

- For Augustine, God's judgment is part of God's very being, so that part of what it means to affirm God is to affirm a self-conscious moral order to the cosmos. We will have access to God's knowledge and God's judgments only at the Last Judgment.
- Thus, we can unequivocally affirm that judgment is real, even as we possess only highly equivocating glimpses of that judgment itself. For Augustine, this confidence is warranted on scriptural grounds. Jesus spoke of the Last Judgment in all four gospels.
- We can even know that Christians can experience two kinds of regeneration, keyed to the two resurrections: the regeneration of the soul via baptism and the regeneration of the body at the Last Judgment. We already have a kind of visible proof in the way that baptism both reflects and intensifies serious moral and spiritual change in some people.



*The Last Judgment*

- For Augustine, the question of offering proofs or evidence to a skeptical audience is of decidedly secondary interest. His conviction, which is pretty general across Christian theologians, is that propositional argument is not the most powerful means of proclaiming the Gospel; rather, the witness of vital and vibrant Christian lives, lived out in community for others, is the best witness.

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### The Nature of the Apocalypse

- This point also bears on his immediate concern about how Christians should think about the end of time. The temporal duration of our age is immaterial. We always have enough time to do God's will or to refuse it. Besides, in the true present of the presence of God's eternity, all times are co-present.

- Thus Augustine can affirm both that this is the day of salvation and that it is indeterminately deferred.
- In Augustine's age, Christians professed one of two general views about the apocalypse.
  - The literalists believed in a literal end of the world as detailed in the book of Revelation. Some saw the "millennium" prophesied in Revelation to be a literal period of a thousand years.
  - The metaphoricalists saw in Revelation primarily an inner or spiritual meaning about a struggle within the soul.
- The apocalypse leads to a transfigured life: not an escape from Creation, but a final and full reception of the gift. Now we live in the world, and the grammar of the word "world" does not imply any need for a God. But if the world is Creation, that word immediately implies that this reality depends on another, whom we label Creator.
- Together with this knowledge of God as Creator will be knowledge of God as one who knows truly all about our world. God is not just decisive agential will but also effortlessly and relentlessly inescapable knowledge and understanding. God is not just Creator and sustainer; God is also judge.
- The knowledge of judgment that humans will have is complicated and limited in ways that underscore the differences between God and the human, even in the human's eternal state. Yet some things we may be able to know are interesting.
  - Reflect on the knowledge that the blessed have of evil. In what way, Augustine asks, will the blessed know the damned, as the scriptures say they will? They will know what happens to them, but indirectly. They will not be deflected from their direct knowledge of God; they will know by implication from knowledge of God's justice.

- On the other hand, consider the knowledge that the damned will not have about heaven. The damned will not know what is going on “inside” heaven. They will be wholly consumed with the utter frustration of their own desires and will have no time to be interested in anything outside themselves. They cannot know goodness.
- But while Augustine teaches us to be modest in our speculations, we must also be emphatic in our affirmations of the Christian mission of shaping our souls in the right way to receive the judgment now and the inauguration of the kingdom.

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*Openness to exploration  
and questioning is at the  
heart of Augustine’s picture  
of the Christian life.*
- From within a failing way of life, no beams of light pointing a way to a new future of hope are visible. We cannot anticipate. The apocalypse must be spiritualized because the lesson that emerges from it is that we are saved not because of what we do, but despite ourselves. We must be always prepared, always on our toes, for the messiah.

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- Augustine resists all temptations toward literal apocalyptic thought and loosens the semiotic cord between the present moment and the eschatological end of all things without cutting it—thus giving history and its scriptural script a significant amount of flexibility and ambiguity. But the ambiguity about the details of the event do not lead him to be uncertain about the fact of the event.
- Openness to exploration and questioning is at the heart of Augustine’s picture of the Christian life, and he means here to show his audience how to go about thinking about these matters—how to inhabit intellectually the central speculative, contemplative, and affective dynamics of the Christian faith,

which Augustine thinks central to every Christian's faith. In this way, apocalyptic speculation—Käsemann's "mother of all theology"—is made a fruitful part of Christian life.

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### Questions to Consider

1. To what degree do you think Augustine understood "judgment" correctly when he said it was properly a property of God and not humans? What does that mean for our ongoing assessments of our own actions and those of others?
  2. If Augustine "spiritualizes the eschaton," as this lecture argued, what constructive role does he think belief in the end of all things can have for Christians? Do you think this is a good thing or not?
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# Augustine's Vision of Hell (Book 21)

## Lecture 21

**A**ugustine focuses on the idea of hell in terms of the continuity and distance between sinning in time and being damned. Augustine thinks the doctrine of hell is not only just but gives us good reason to believe that hell is a creation of God's goodness. Belief in hell has declined in the past century. We have a hard time imagining why anyone would suffer endlessly in a lake of fire for crimes they committed while on earth. So unlike most people in his own time, we face an initial blockage in struggling to see what Augustine was propounding.

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### Immortal Suffering

- In addressing hell, Augustine first distinguishes between two big issues that should be separately addressed:
  - First is the question of how the situation of hell is possible at all; how plausible it is that we can imagine immortal bodies continually consumed but continually recreated in ceaseless fire.
  - Second is the question of the precise nature of the punishment of the human soul and body.
- On the issue of plausibility, Augustine appeals to the wide range of realities in that extend beyond our everyday experience. Sure, he says; consider salamanders, creatures who in Augustine's age were widely considered to live in fire and volcanoes. The crucial point of his claim is that the world is much stranger than our normal experience would suggest.
- On the issue of immortal bodies that suffer endlessly, he responds that demons certainly have suffered permanently since Creation

without any extinction or lessening of their power. Augustine's point is that our ordinary experience should not be presumed to delimit the absolute boundaries of what is possible.

- Having established the range of possibility, we can begin to explore just what happens to the damned in hell and how it happens. For Augustine, the point is that the suffering will be real and endless. Every moment will be freshly painful.
- But not only will the sufferers feel immediate pain. They will also suffer reflexive psychological regret.
  - They will know their ultimate destiny, and they will not be able fully to deny that knowledge. They will realize the full extent of their self-deception.
  - They will also not know. They will remain what they have been all along and still be in denial about their situation, even though they are in hell.

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## The Nature of Punishment

- Augustine next takes up the question of the nature of the infernal suffering of the damned. Why, in particular, material fire? Fire is the utmost extension of changing matter—the most temporary state of matter. The soul's relation to matter is the problem—it wants stability, it wants matter not to change. But fire is the quickest, most volatile form of matter, and so it teaches the soul that its hopes are foiled.
- The temptation is to think that hell's torments are fundamentally fleshly. Augustine says that the soul, not the body, is what really suffers. The key is the way the soul participates in our embodiment. If the soul expects to find its stability in flesh, it will be disappointed and feel pain; if the soul seeks stability instead in God, it will not be disappointed.



- Another question is the infinite punishment for a finite crime. Augustine refers to what the scriptures say about punishment, and in particular what Christ says. But he finds more reasons for why hell is permanent and endless.

- The punishment for a crime is measured to the magnitude of the transgression. In this case the core transgression—the utterly absurd rejection of God's gifts to humanity and the attempt to rebel against God—is infinitely immense. This is why hell is eternal.

- The magnitude of the crime is connected to the fact that the crime's consequences for the criminal's soul are not self-reparable. If God chooses not to heal the sinful soul from its self-inflicted wound, one cannot accuse God of injustice.
- To the argument that punishment might be remedial, rather than eternal, Augustine responds that some punishments are purgatorial, but the ultimate punishments of hell follow the Last Judgment, which means that God's judgments have been finalized.

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*On the issue of immortal bodies that suffer endlessly, Augustine responds that demons certainly have suffered permanently since Creation without any extinction or lessening of their power.*  
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## The Possibility of Universal Salvation

- Augustine is wary of the danger of bad mercy, which is that our innate sympathy can see only the suffering soul and not the transgression. It can make us forget the details of the crimes committed and overlook the real problem, which is the wickedness intrinsic to the damned.

- This kind of spectatorial pity does not compel itself to gather an honest assessment of the moral situation at hand; it simply finds unpleasant the idea of people suffering. It implies that God is making them suffer, that the cause of their suffering lies outside themselves. In this way, it is much like the fruitless repentance suffered by the damned in hell.
- According to Augustine, the various church practices that the merciful think might sponsor a belief in universalism do not in fact do so. There are distinct limits on God's mercy, though they are unknown to us, and they are a part of God's love for Creation, extended across time. Those limits give Creation a space to be what it will be and not be undone by God. God gives creatures a terrible honor to let them be whom they will be.
- The problem with universalism is that it can suggest that history doesn't ultimately matter. It doesn't respect the idea that some things are determinately negative, that there are remainders.
- The utopianism of universalist temptation, for Augustine, at its utmost asks not just whether evil will turn out for the good, but whether it will prove not to have been evil at all. For him this idea leads one to believe that cosmic history leaves no refuse behind; everything is incorporated in the final reconciliation of all with all.
- Such a dream of seamless reconciliation is dangerous; a doctrine of universal salvation, cyclically undertaken, undoes the meaning of history. If history first repeats itself as tragedy, and second as farce, what about the twentieth time? Such repetition simply sands away meaning from the events, making them literally more of



*According to Augustine, the various church practices that the merciful think might sponsor a belief in universalism do not in fact do so.*



the same. Any such utopia gives license to almost any horror in the present, for such horrors' true meaning will be determined—and whitewashed—in the utopian eschaton yet to come.

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## Augustine's Definition of Hell

- Hell, on Augustine's reading, is entirely personal. Hell is the complete inability genuinely to relate to other people—no way to see yourself in another or feel another's pain in yourself; no way to empathize with, to have the barriers of self and other break down in a larger, more powerful "we"; no sense of the possibility of self-transcendence. Hell is suffocating solitude, crucially self-inflicted, a condition appropriate for damned souls, and caused by their own agency.
- More amazing—and harder to understand—is that hell, like all else in Creation, is for Augustine in itself good. Augustine's metaphysics make it impossible for something to be truly evil in itself. Hell is good in two ways:
  - It is an instrument of justice, whereby those who are wicked get what they deserve. In fact their problem is that heaven is where they do not want to go, for that would be to acknowledge God's sovereignty.
  - It is also an instrument of mercy and of God's love, whereby those who are wicked, and who in their wickedness desire to harm God by destroying God's most basic gift to themselves—their own being—are protected against the consummation of their own tragically misguided intentions.
- Indeed, it may be easiest for us today to imagine hell not in terms of fire, but as essentially the condition of being in God's presence and not wanting to be there, so trying to move as far away from that presence as possible.

- While the blessed want ever fuller acquaintance with God because they are properly integrated and affirm their being as creatures of God, the damned are deeply ambivalent about their existence. They want to escape God, but they also want to keep being themselves. But to keep being themselves means to keep being in relation to God, for they are themselves only because God has made them so.
- The problem for the damned is precisely that there is no “away” from God. And that is hell to them—the final realization that there is no escape from God, and they still, and permanently, desire such escape.
- Perhaps Augustine’s conception of hell is best understood thus: At the end of time some creatures are still allowed to exist in ambivalent opposition to God. Their existence at all is good, though not as good as it would otherwise be. By allowing these creatures the ability to dissent from God, God is in no way harming them, but simply allowing them to harm themselves. Even so self-harmed, the damned are still intrinsically good, and hell turns out to be simply the decision they have made all along, to be in the dolorous kingdom in which they choose to believe that they reign.
- The question of hell is one that we often think of in purely juridical terms. But it is not clear that the terms we use should be juridical. Hell clearly looks like it is a wholly juridical reality—it is, after all, not at all a means of healing humans, or anyone else. It is a deposit of utter suffering and pain. But it can be voyeuristically sadistic, perhaps by encouraging a psychologically self-harming fixation on suffering and its details, in two abstract ways that make us less sensitive to actual suffering:
  - › By focusing on the mechanics of suffering, we get used to paying attention to how suffering happens, not that it is happening, and so we grow less immediately concerned to stop it.

- A speculative attitude anesthetizes us from the human face of suffering, makes us not think of others as our equals, and seduces us into a problematic "God's eye" view. Here the danger of reflection on hell is what it does to us in this world.
- Some continuity exists between sinning on earth and suffering in hell, but a great deal of disruption as well. Augustine tries not to let speculation have the upper hand; he tries to make it useful to think about these things for our lives in the here and now. Not apocalyptic voyeurism but an existential attempt to make sense of beliefs he takes to be essential to the Christian faith is driving his account.

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### Questions to Consider

1. What does the saints' beatific knowledge of the damned consist of, for Augustine? Should the saints have any knowledge of the damned at all? Why or why not?
  2. Having read Augustine, ask if he is right: Should Christians understand hell as self-inflicted? Is hell good writ little? Why is hell eternal punishment for a temporal crime?
  3. In hell, what exactly does the suffering consist in? Does the soul burn or the body?
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# Heaven: The Self Redeemed (Book 22)

**A**nd so at last we come to Augustine's vision of the final fulfilled state of the human, of Creation, and the full realization of God. Augustine manages to demarcate once again what believers can affirm with confidence, what they can hypothesize with more or less probability, and what they must simply admit they do not or cannot know. In a way he expositis the eschaton, in order to show us what the implications of that doctrine are for humans now, and how very little else of determinate doctrinal or metaphysical content we can reliably derive from it today.

- The challenge to Augustine is to show exactly how our experience of history has significance, and in what ways the particularities of our lives' journeys really matter. It will help to recall that Augustine spiritualizes the eschaton. The end of time is definitely real for Augustine, but its value lies in how it affects our behavior, our character, and our loves now in our inhabitation of the present.
- The doctrine of the inaugurated eschatology, an eschaton that has begun but has not yet reached its climactic form or realization, cultivates in us an attitude and disposition of knowing something about the determinate shape of our lives, but not enough to speak with much confidence.
- It demands that believers have faith and hope in a continuity between now and then. That is why Christians live in sacramental suspension. For Augustine, Christians are at best "happy in hope." Here Augustine gives us what he can of the inner details of that hope—his reasoning about the hope that sustains Christians

in this life and that serves as a promise of what their true life in the world to come will be.

- Augustine discusses three big topics in this book: the resurrection of the body and the significance of history, his vision of God that will occupy the blessed in the life to come, and his reflections on the nature of human agency in heaven, and in particular on the four stages of freedom humans experience over the course of history.

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## Resurrection of the Body

- At the end of time, all will be resurrected into bodies. The bodies will be flesh, but they will be spiritual flesh. Furthermore, this embodiment will be historical. We are our histories, and we are our bodies, and our eschatological happiness must be related to our past, which is not entirely happy.
- Thus the details of our bodies will not be erased. Curly hair, eye color, face shapes, everything truly part of our bodies will be retained and transfigured. Even sex is not a problem. There will be no sexual intercourse in heaven, for its essential purpose of reproduction is accomplished; but our desires for intimacy and connection that sex served in history will be met in the kingdom in far more profound ways.
- Even in this life, something miraculous and wondrous exists in the joining of immaterial soul and material body. The amazing thing is that our physical world is intelligible, that physical matter has been made a fit home for divine meaning. And yet we know it must be true, because of the physical Incarnation of Jesus. Because Jesus was truly God made flesh, we see that at the end of time, this material world will be transfigured as worthy of bearing glorious and immortal permanence.

- Belief in resurrection requires a transformation in our imaginations, a transformation in where we seek the miraculous; it should no longer be sought in extraordinariness, but in the ordinary. Consider the astonishing material fact of the resurrection of Christ and the even more astonishing historical fact of its common belief, beginning as it did with a tiny band of illiterate fishermen.
- Augustine uses his perception of the flawed character of the world to argue that those who reject his belief in our bodies' ultimate sanctification are basing their rejection on the belief that the bodies we have now are the best kind of bodies that we have. But, says Augustine, our bodies are not normative bodies, but corrupted by the fall; hence, he argues that the problem is not with bodies *per se*, but with our bodies' corruption.
- Augustine affirms that bodies retain their distinct individuality, and their individuality is in part the way they each develop across time, in their own distinct physicality. People will not all be resurrected according to some ideal type of human; the full diversity of humanity will be represented. The blessed will be immediately visually recognizable by others for who they are.
- Creation's diversity is also at times marked in pains on our bodies that make up the world as well. The world is a cycle of violence and turbulence; the question is whether the history of violence, an ingredient of the history of creation can itself be part of what is redeemed.
- Augustine extends his aesthetics to show how the

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*Christ's resurrected body has gone through death and transfiguration and is not undone. Christ's resurrection completes and transfigures Christ's death; it is not an undoing of it.*

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wounds of time will not be erased, but will be made of positive value for us and for the world. History will matter in the eschaton, so its marks must have some purchase on humans even after the resurrection of the body.

- This intuition is confirmed, for Augustine, in the wounds of the martyrs. We know bodies will retain their natural characteristics; some of the infirmities of age will be reversed. But other injuries will not be so easily effaced.
- The wounds of the martyrs who died for the faith will remain. A beauty will shine out from those wounds, though the glory will not be directly of those wounds. The defects will not be there, but the proof of their valor will be.
- Christ's resurrected body has gone through death and transfiguration and is not undone. Christ's resurrection completes and transfigures Christ's death; it is not an undoing of it. History is singular and permanent, though we do not know its full meaning at present. "Death and resurrection" are thus part of the meaning of history and the role of creation in the economy of God.
- In heaven, the blessed will know evil in this way—what they have directly suffered, and what evil still persists. By extrapolation from what they know of God's goodness and justice, they will recollect both their past misery and the eternal suffering of the damned.

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## The Vision of God

- All the above is about how the redeemed life will relate to earlier and other forms of existence. Yet Augustine expressly attends to two additional features: the nature of human vision and the character of the redeemed human will. These two features together collect the two most fundamental features of our existence as creatures—how we know and how we act.

- Augustine knows well the Beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” The saints in paradise will see God in the spirit, so they see God even if their eyes are shut. Yet the seeing is not by means of the flesh, though it is seeing in the flesh. And they will see without interruption or intermediation, seeing God continually and truly.
- This vision is God’s own peace, understood fully only by God, of which the blessed will partake. This kind of seeing will be continuous in some way with vision as we experience it now, though it will be immeasurably more powerful and revealing; the eyes will discern things of an immaterial nature.
- When the blessed see created things, they will see not just them, but God in them. They will see God as “all in all,” as manifest in things of this world. The objects of creation reveal God as integral to what they truly are, and God is using them to exhibit God’s glory in a particular way. It is seeing creation itself, but now we see creation as having a point and a purpose, as created matter speaking of its Creator.

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## The Four Stages of Freedom

- In the heavenly city the blessing will be not simply of vision but of agency, and this free agency is very different from what we know as freedom today. For Augustine, the fullest picture of good human agency is characterized by humans’ finding that to sin is not possible.
- Augustine thinks the history of humanity can be divided into four stages of human freedom.
  - Before the Fall, it was possible for humans to sin.
  - After the Fall and before the grace of Christ, it is not possible for humans not to sin.

- › After the grace of Christ has been received it becomes possible for humans not to sin.



*Augustine knows well the  
Beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in  
heart, for they shall see God.”*

- › After the Second Coming, when history has reached its end and the souls of the blessed rest with all the company of heaven in perfect love of God, human wills will be strengthened in such a way that it is no longer possible for humans to sin.



- The blessed will be fully liberated from the slavery to sin to which all humans are manifestly captive. That enslavement splits the will and thereby sunders our integrity. When we are liberated, the singular goodness of God will not simply be the primary good—it will be the obvious good.
- Augustine draws a picture of idealized agency where the center is not a wide range of options, but no options at all—human agency whose flourishing lies wholly in the complete and unimpeded engagement of the whole person in the dynamic joy of paradise. For him, true, fully achieved human agency is one where “choice” plays no role, where one is wholly and willingly engaged—but where one seems to have no choice.
- To characterize this end in a more straightforwardly positive way Augustine offers a powerful single sentence that sums up so much of his eschatological imagination: “There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. Behold, this is what shall be in the end without end. For what other end is there for us, but to arrive at the kingdom which has no end?”
- Augustine’s claim that eternity is being co-present to all moments of time offers some comfort. If that is the case, each instant of life is ultimately no less real than every other instant. That means that

redemption, when it happens, happens to every instant. It's not that the course of one's life is a runway and the soul lifts off like an airplane at the moment of death; but that the whole course of your life is gathered into God each and every moment.

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### Questions to Consider

1. Is the eschatological kingdom of God fundamentally a restoration of Eden or something else altogether for Augustine? What does the answer tell us about Christian life in our world today?
  2. What does Augustine think are the four stages of human freedom? Why are they ordered in this way? Do you think this account of freedom makes sense?
  3. What does seeing God amount to, for Augustine?
  4. What does a resurrected body look like? If I have a scar on my knee from arthroscopic surgery, is it still there in my resurrected flesh?
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# The City of God as a Single Book

## Lecture 23

A book worthy of study will engage a bewilderingly diverse set of issues—through characters and plot lines, perhaps, or through a complicated series of thematic issues. It will do so because life, as we experience it, is bewilderingly diverse. To be the composition of a reasonably coherent intelligence, the book will sustain a singularity of vision amid the diversity, and we ourselves, encountering the book, will find ourselves challenged to develop our intellectual and attentive muscles to be able to absorb its point of view as a singular point of view.

- Augustine's *The City of God* is such a book. It is a work so searching, so wide-ranging, so vast, and so remarkably coherent that it has few rivals as an achievement of the human mind. As an effort to come to grips with the inheritance of a civilization that raised you, but which you now find radically faulty, and as a way of coming to terms with the conversion of the world from one worldview to another, it knows few rivals for its diversity of views.
- For Christians and those raised in Christian (or post-Christian societies), it is much more than this: it remains one of the most important and influential works of thinking about politics, human community, the shape of human life, and the nature and destiny of the world.

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### Augustine and Politics

- The work's first great theme is Christianity as a political religion: the accusation that the Christians did not rightly care for Rome and could not properly care for worldly political life. Augustine replies with a threefold response that articulates his vision of

the essential nature of politics, his understanding of its origins, and its aspirations, all in the service of showing how Christians should and should not be political creatures.

- Augustine has a clear sense of the nature of politics as a consequence of the Fall. We need something to coordinate our various passions and interests and at least loosely organize our fears because they do not naturally gain organization on their own.
- But this practice of coordination is really only a restraining endeavor for disordered loves. As an essentially this-worldly project, it has no hope of achieving any permanent or stable goods. In this way, politics may be important as a site for reflection on the human condition and for revealing the configuration of our pathologies, but not as a vehicle to achieve our ends.
- We must be constantly reminded that politics cannot be an ultimately consequential arena for achieving our genuine goods because politics is but one permutation of our deepest theological passions. In this way politics is wrapped up in theological longings, and indeed idolatry, from the very beginning.
- Every political community courts what we might call the fusion of church and state. The human longing for God is not solitary, nor does it seek an individual end. We were created for a social communion, with one another and God, and even after the Fall, that longing for society has not departed; it has only warped into our various political passions.

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*Once we are untethered from God  
after the Fall, our affections keep  
flowing from us.*

- ● ●
- Much of this point of view is captured in Augustine's choice of the word "city" in his title and as his central operational concept of this work. And so we need

to see that our politics is always, inescapably, a disappointed politics of heaven. Knowing that, for Augustine, is the first axiom of political wisdom.

- Augustine offers no discrete and portable political philosophy at all, but only a political theology in which the activities and affections that we count as political are a haphazard collection of phenomena scattered across the several dimensions of human life in the world as a whole. Humans must inhabit political communities, in part out of a need to suppress or expel the kinds of turbulent passions and people who make social life so dangerous in a fallen world.
- We must critique the religious propriety of patriotism, but we cannot deny the religious duty of public service. Christians must seek the welfare of the city where they live, and in doing so they serve that city better than its more fanatically attached devotees.

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### Vision of Humanity

- The second great theme of *The City of God* is the picture of the human it propounds: a theological anthropology.
  - The human is a creature of excess, of gratuity. We are eccentric—that is, having our centers outside of ourselves. We find our true end not in enclosed self-satisfaction, but in ecstatic going outside of ourselves in praise and union with God.
  - Once we are untethered from God after the Fall, our affections keep flowing from us. We are, essentially, a creature who loves to praise, to give glory, to worship.
- Augustine chooses to capture this fact about us by making love the key term of his anthropology. It is hard to overestimate the decisiveness of this choice for future thought—not just politically, but theologically and morally—in the West. Theologically and

psychologically it means that who we most definitely are is discoverable by finding out where we invest our affections.

- Morally it means that the core matter for us to address in thinking about ethics is not the quality of the act itself, nor its consequences, but the intention behind the act. If your heart is rightly directed, Augustine argued your actions cannot be other than good. Instead of worrying about principles or maximizing utility, we ought to work on our hearts as the primary object of our ethical labors.
- More profoundly, this focus on love really does alter our vision of the kind of agents we are and invites us to reconceive our agency. We are creatures who come to knowledge of our agential powers only within a horizon of preset attachments and affections. Thus our action is never unprompted, but always in the context of and in response to a world lit up by our loves.
- Augustine conceives action within a larger framing context of responding, or even more extremely, of suffering.

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## Vision of the Church

- A third great theme is the right kind of human community, the truest politics we can find in this world, and the right context in which to live our lives: the city of God on pilgrimage in this life, found in the community of the church and the practices it undertakes.
- The church is not only a community bound together by the profession of a creed and practice of a liturgy; for Augustine it is more deeply a community of moral formation, a people who have come together and understand themselves to be receiving the healing grace of God and trying as explicitly as possible in their communal lives to receive that grace.



- This effort to receive healing must be taken up assiduously. No sloth is permitted in the city of God.
  - › Christians are called upon to perform positive acts of charity sponsored by the compassion they are required to cultivate toward those vulnerable in their communities and to all humans.
  - › They are required to exercise forbearance and patience, even to the most outrageous provocations and the most painful persecutions.
  - › They are also called upon to see these practices as helping them to cultivate an understanding of themselves as stretched out over time and to see themselves as ever more deeply in need of God's help.

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## Vision of the World

- Augustine's fourth great theme is the transfigured vision of the world as creation and his efforts to cultivate in his audience not only a typological but a sacramental imagination of the world.
  - › Augustine was accused not just of despising politics, but also of despising the world. From his perspective, this accusation makes sense only if your own attachment to the world is so desperate as to prevent your seeing that he loves it in God, as a gift of God and as composed of signs of God.
  - › Augustine's affection for the world is real, but it is rooted in his perception of the world as the primordial unprompted expression of God's love for what is outside of God. He sees it as the context of redemption, for humanity's movement ever more fully into God at the end of time.



*If your heart is rightly directed,  
Augustine argued your actions  
cannot be other than good.*



## Vision of God

- Augustine's last great theme is his vision of God. But even here, the God Augustine calls his readers to believe in is something quite radically different than what they may have previously understood God to be. Where the Romans and Greeks had seemed to believe in divinity as set apart and indifferent to the world, Augustine's reading of the Bible made him see that God was rather the father of the prodigal son, who runs to meet his returning repentant child, heedless of his own dignity.
- In this vision of religion, God has already accomplished everything we need to get to God. In an age where religion was still largely conceived transactionally, this idea actually is quite revolutionary.

- God has already done everything for us. In return, we are called on to go deeper into God, into God's love, deeper into being the creatures we were always meant to be.

- Much of the time, Augustine thought, this God is literally too good for humans to believe. Yet God has graciously offered routes into believing through our participation in the church, the body of Christ—one of the gifts that God has given us to help us get to God.



*Where the Romans and Greeks had seemed to believe in divinity as set apart and indifferent to the world, Augustine's reading of the Bible made him see that God was rather the father of the prodigal son, who runs to meet his returning repentant child, heedless of his own dignity.*



- We do this “going deeper” within the church by loving one another, loving the world, and working out works of compassion and charity. Thus for Augustine, this form of religion is as

thoroughly a form of ethics as of piety. To know God is to participate in God and to participate in God is to love God's creation.

- These large themes go some way to explaining why Augustine calls this book *The City of God* and why he started the work with the word *gloriosissimam*: most glorious. We live in a political world, though we do not know the true meaning either of politics or of world today. The community that helps us learn both of those words' true meanings, the church, exists only because of God's loving action; and we need that community, under that God's gracious tutelage, just because we are the kinds of creatures that we are.

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### Questions to Consider

1. If Augustine were to rewrite *The City of God* today, what would its title be? And what would the first word be? (Make sure to explain what significances you think the title and first word have for *The City of God*.)
  2. Pride, despair, praise: Which of these concepts is closest to the center of gravity of Augustine's theological anthropology? Why?
  3. Can one be an Augustinian Christian and also a patriot? How would that work?
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# *The City of God's* Journey through History

**A**ugustine's city outlived him by merely a matter of months. The Vandals, making their way through Gaul, over the Mediterranean, and across the North African coast were besieging Hippo by the summer of 430. Augustine died on August 28, 430, knowing that his city was surrounded and no rescue was coming from Carthage. The city surrendered and was occupied in the spring of 431 and went into decline at once. The trans-Mediterranean economy in which it flourished fell into decrepitude, and it shrank into a fishing town. Within a century there was little left of the city Augustine had served.

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## Barbarians and the Rise of Christianity

- After Augustine's death and the end of the siege, somehow his staff saved his library, including all his own works. They made it across the sea to Italy and were copied and distributed in the West, wherever the Christian churches prayed and preached and thought in Latin.
- His bones made it too: Removed by his church first to Cagliari in Sardinia, they finally found a home in Pavia, in the basilica of San Pietro in Ciel d'Oro, where they rest to this day.
- We have his books. We have his bones. Do we, then, have him? In a very real way we do not. We lack Augustine because our organic connection to him was severed by the chaos that followed his death and erased the audiences to which his works were addressed and with whom he shared a coherent worldview.

- Unlike the thought of Thomas Aquinas, who spawned a continuous and still-living tradition of commentators, Augustine's work has no such descendants, so his thought is continually rediscovered, but the organic assumptions behind his work died with him.
- Each age has to reinvent the Augustine it will use. And perhaps Augustine would have enjoyed that irony about himself: that the contingencies of history and the vicissitudes of human society have rendered his work simultaneously foundational and oblique; treated with admiration and skepticism, with honor and suspicion, reverence and scrutiny.
- Historians who insist that the fall of Rome is too melodramatic and ideologically self-congratulatory a description for late antiquity have a point. Civilization went on. But something momentous changed: The barbarians stopped becoming Roman. Furthermore, the barbarians were convertible to Christianity as a civilizing step up for them.
- With the barbarians' ascendancy came a change in Christianity's cultural status. Legally it had been long allowed, then endorsed, then prescribed; now it gained cultural status as tradition, and insofar as the barbarians wanted access to Rome's political and existential legitimacy, conversion to Christianity was the clear way to do that.
- In accepting conversion, the barbarians did not need to leave behind their political or tribal identities. Christianity became a supra-political unifying force across multiple barbarian kingdoms, and something like Christendom was born: a world of multiple political communities, yet unified by a common religious culture.
- That condition prevailed, more or less, from then until very close to now, for it is only in living memory that, at least superficially, Christianity ceased to provide the glue of a common culture holding Europe and its progeny together.



Figure of a barbarian

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## Augustine's Influence on Western Thought

- Again and again, the history of Augustinianism is the repeated history of the rediscovery of Augustine, not because he was ever truly forgotten, but because successive generations found ways to find their world pertinently addressed in the endless plenitude of wisdom and insight that flowed ceaselessly from his works.
- These rediscoveries were necessary not only because a new age asked new questions; ironically, they were necessary because the church Augustine served attempts ceaselessly to forget the lessons that he tried to teach it. His beliefs were too inconvenient, too unsettling, too antiauthoritarian, and too demanding for those who want a well-ordered church and a stable and clear marker of the city of God.
- Medieval thought is hugely informed by Augustine, but so is the Reformation, which might not have happened had it not been for that errant Augustinian monk Luther's brooding over Augustine,

and Calvin then reflecting on his political thought and his theory of divine providence.

- Modernity itself bears a great debt to him, or rather to those who misread him. The voluntarism of thinkers like William of Ockham and Duns Scotus, whose picture of action has deeply shaped our own, begins in readings of Augustine on the will and sin.
- A version of Cartesian rationalism's key phrase, *cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am," actually literally appears in *de Civitate Dei*, though in some of his earliest writings, he had already refuted the worries that so vexed Descartes, and in fact is now seen as having anticipated some of Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's own thinking about the mind's being-in-the-world.

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### Misreadings of Augustine

- *The City of God* was much copied, but was apparently not much read. The best evidence we have against careful attention is the kind of views it was thought to underwrite. For instance, pretty quickly after Augustine died a tradition emerged that read Augustine but retreated into received ideas and could not understand the radical nature of the revolution Augustine was instigating.
- This tradition baptized him into what was later labeled "Political Augustinianism." This was taken as authentically Augustinian, though you can judge for yourself if it should be considered such: In its view, the city of God was the church, the earthly city was the world, and Christian kings were types of Christ, so people in the church serve Christ by obeying the king.
- In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new vision developed that saw Augustine as more suspicious of the political pretenses of human beings. Some, like Reinhold Niebuhr, developed it in more fundamentally coldly realist directions; others emphasized the eschatological

complexity, but reality, of the vision's moralism. On this reading of Augustine, humans always make a botch of ordering society.

- Still more recent thinkers have modified this vision, urging a more ambivalent account of Augustine's views on politics. He did not endorse whatever authorities were out there, nor did he condemn all politics as an abyssal night in which we are nevertheless condemned to stumble. It is possible for politics to be an oblique medium of grace and revelatory insight.
- To read *The City of God* is to be equipped with the tools to understand all these accounts and to appreciate places in the text that function as the nodes of especially dense interpretive debate and to make your own decision about those rival interpretations.

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### Augustine's Influence on World History

- In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, roughly half of humanity was governed by two empires, China's and Rome's. These empires were run by semi-divine emperors in cities far vaster than any before in the world. They were similarly structured and faced similar internal struggles and difficulties from tensions between provincial localities and the imperial metropolitan center.
- Both came to grief in similar ways, through struggles for power between rival forces in the heartland, then swamped by barbarian invasions, though both also survived as ongoing states outside the original core.
- And then, from the 6<sup>th</sup> century forward, the Chinese empire began to rebuild itself, eventually reappearing as a coherent structure across its old territory and enduring up to today through a series of dynastic cycles. In the Mediterranean and Europe, however, no such reconstitution happened. Today there is a recognizable China, but the Roman Empire exists only as a dream or a nightmare.



- What caused these divergent histories? It seems clear that part of the reason was broadly ideological.
  - Han China affirmed Confucianism, which emphasized the value of a unified state, horizontally and vertically integrated and governed by wise scholar-bureaucrats, as an essential part of a harmoniously ordered cosmos.

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*To read The City of God is to be equipped with the tools to understand all these accounts and to appreciate places in the text that function as the nodes of especially dense interpretive debate and to make your own decision about those rival interpretations.*

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- In the West, Christian ideology could give lip service to Rome, but it could never wholeheartedly endorse the idea that the political structure of the empire was an essential part of God's plan for the world.
- Thus, political actors in the East would operate in a context where restoring the empire was a widely affirmed immediate good, while political actors in the West held instead that the empire had a hint of the demonic about it. And the decisive force for the way political thinkers in the West thought, it seems clear, was Augustine.

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## Failure To Understand Augustine

- The conditions that would have made understanding available, at least to the educated elites of the day, disappeared quickly after Augustine died. He was in Henri-Irene Marrou's phrase, a Latin Byzantine: someone who imagined the continuity of civilization on its linguistic, cultural, and political bases from ancient Greece through Rome to 5<sup>th</sup>-century North Africa.

- This school believed in the analogies and even the continuities between psyche and polis, soul and city, and polis and theopolis—the city and the city of God. It taught that through education we might come to appreciate. Augustine dissented from this view in its confidence that such harmony is available after the Fall, though some believe his basic thought remained rooted in the idea that analogies between these different levels were real and useful.
- In two ways, the barbarian occupation of the west undercut this school of thought.
  - Education could never survive such an experience. The confidence of the culture that its heritage would sustain the next generation was undercut when that next generation saw that it was ruled by barbarians.
  - The political vision was not easily translated into a logic of multiple states. The secular political opposite of the city of God had to be as all-encompassing in its realm as God's is in its own.
- If this story of Latin Byzantism is true, then a disquieting possibility arises: We who think of ourselves as descendants of Augustine may in fact be more clearly inheritors of a different tradition, the tradition of the austere monastics of the Egyptian desert.
- Such monastics rejected the continuities between the pre-Christian world and the Christian one. This tradition was the basis in the West for the infrastructure of the Latin church and for the universities, when they appeared; it may still influence the way we see the world.

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### Augustine's Legacy

- Nonetheless, what insight we can glean from Augustine's books seems substantial enough. All his lessons are powerful; all are

relevant. His work is philosophically and theologically profound; politically acute and wise; culturally erudite.

- It is astonishing how much is “known” by people almost entirely by hearsay and how much of that hearsay is demonstrably false. Such is the case with Augustine. Despite being so well-known, the book remains to an astonishing degree an unsummitted alp, an undiscovered country. To do better, you must expect to see Augustine not as words on a page, but the quicksilver mind behind them.

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### Questions to Consider

1. What would Augustine say about how *The City of God* has been treated in this lecture series? What does the answer tell us about how he would view reading his work as a book that shaped world history?
  2. If Augustine were able to read the history of thought after his death until today, would he feel that his work had done what he wanted it to do?
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